THE CASE FOR REASON

Volume II

A Scientific Enquiry into Belief

NARENDRA DABHOLKAR

Translated by SUMAN OAK

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Translated by Suman Oak

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Introduction

Many an intellectual discussion involving rationalists has seen plenty of heterodoxies. A lot of these pertain to issues such as god, religion, spirituality and secularism. In this book, I attempt to express ideas that took shape from my own experiences and reflection. I do not claim that this is the official manifesto of the Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti (ANiS). But I can assert that members of its working committee are contemplating these views. (They do seem to agree with my articles in *Warta Patra* , ANiS's monthly magazine, on some of the topics dealt with here.)

The discussion on how to grasp the concept of god and the role of religion in human history drives ANiS's movements. So does the exposition on 'Faith and Superstition' and 'My Understanding of Spirituality'. Maharashtra's social reformers would be the subject of a vast tome by themselves. Their thoughts on education, agriculture, governance, technology, etc. have effected change in some measure. But society has been more or less apathetic to their take on rationalism and superstition. I have tried to compile a coherent presentation of these observations of mine. See the chapter on 'Social Reformers of Maharashtra and the Eradication of Superstition'.

I invite the reader to critique my views on secularism. Over the years, social reformers have investigated religion in a constructive way. Many of them have interpreted it as the opposite of 'vivek jagar', which means awakening the faculty of discernment among people. So, will such an awakening provide a footing for the propagation of secularism? Society should engage in a positive dialogue over this question. At ANiS, we aren't interested in vocal discourses on rationalism. What we want is to see whether we can, by sharpening our reasoning and morality, help the world around us.

1

The Concept of God

Long before the advent of human beings, the animal kingdom was already established on Earth. The application of simple logic shows us that these creatures were unlikely to have any concept of god. Then came monkeys and apes, followed by the forest man. Early man neither developed any language nor harboured any notion of a higher power.

In the due course of evolution, a process of production-based labour and cooperation evolved among humans. Then came the birth of language, the formation of various ideas and an increase in knowledge. Even then, there was no concept of god.

Therefore, based on the evidence, the origin of the concept of god dates back to 10,000 years at most. Anthropologists believe the idea originated with the dissolution of primitive nomadic society. With general advancement in material circumstances, perhaps man's desires and egotism expanded as well. These must have sowed the seeds in his mind for the development of the idea of god. One thing is for sure: all notions of god and all the gods we know are a product of man's brain. Man also decided how these gods were and weren't supposed to behave. Using his imagination, he has created a world of his own —quite distinct from those of animals.

Man then went on to discover and invent new things. His aim behind this was to ensure his own progress, stability, peace and happiness. The concept of god and its inception is an outcome of this effort. Man tested his creations on himself, and these included his experiments with the concept of god as well. He examined it several times in various ways. In the process, he has wasted a lot of time and energy. Some people think it wasn't

at all a waste—that these god experiments have benefited mankind a lot. There is also a group of people who think that this was not a very productive investment. Which of these opinions you support depends on the way you define the concept of god.

Nature has bestowed two appetites on man. The first is his hunger for food, the other is his sex drive. Satisfying these appetites ensured self-protection and the preservation of the human race. These purposes exist even today and will continue to do so forever. Meanwhile, man has invented a third appetite—the need for knowledge. In his efforts to meet it, he has created a world of his own. The concept of god was born out of this mindset of intellectual experimentation. Indeed, it is the loftiest manifestation of human genius. Based on it, man established ideas of piety, stability and safety. But soon, the concept of god enslaved him.

If god did exist, there should have been only one single god for the whole world. Ishwar, Allah, the Father in Heaven shouldn't have been more than one entity. All great souls who experienced divine visions should have seen the same god. But their visions are different, so is the knowledge they received. That's because the images and thoughts of these visionaries stem from their own selves, not outside. These awakened beings must have searched for god in their minds, not out in the world. Their distinct intellects and acquired knowledge would have caused them to have disparate visions. They went on to propagate their learnings for the benefit of mankind. But man, who is like a speck in this unfathomable, gigantic expanse of the universe, felt awed and confused. He must have sought refuge in the omnipotent god of his own imagination to calm his troubled mind.

In India, it was once thought that the assumption of divine creation is no great sign of intelligence. Dharmakirti was a great philosopher and a principal at Nalanda University. According to him, three beliefs were the main characteristics of stupidity: 1) That god made the universe, 2) The Vedas are valid, 3) That you can wipe away your sins with bathing, fasting and penance. One cannot prove god's existence using rational arguments. 'The truth is that we want god to exist. That's why many of us are willing to accept faulty logic to prove his existence.' Vaman

Malhar Joshi offered this pertinent quote in his book *Neeti Shastra Pravesh* . (The title means 'Introduction to Ethics'.) Society can develop confidence in its own ability, but people need to understand one thing. Ram, Krishna, Buddha, Mahavir, Jesus Christ, Muhammad, Basaveshwar and Guru Nanak were all heroes. Their thoughts and deeds form the epitome of human valour, wisdom and maturity. But they weren't gods. Whether their deification is benevolent or malevolent is, of course, debatable.

Opinions on the existence of god

God, angel, heaven, soul and other such concepts were born in the course of the evolution of the human race. These words captured the imagination of the people at large. But the shrewd and culturally powerful used them to exploit the unsuspecting.

Materialist intellectuals such as Charvaka and Dignaga denied the idea of god. Gautam Buddha shunned idol worship. Chakradhar rebutted many concepts from the Vedas. Lenin, Mao and Marxist intellectuals from other countries disbelieved in the notion of god. So did our very own Bhagat Singh, Nanasaheb Gore, Madhavrao Bagal and E.V. Ramasamy Periyar.

Another set of people believes in the existence of god or wishes that he exists. For them, the meaning of god is support for good deeds and opposition to exploitation and suffering. They refuse to accept that god can fuel vested interests, discrimination and exploitation. They can't imagine god supporting meaningless rituals, cruel customs, casteism or superstition. These souls have fought against such vicious tendencies throughout their life—people like Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Vitthal Ramji Shinde, Krantisinh Nana Patil and Sane Guruji.

Then, there are the many who believe in god because of their traditional upbringing. They neither have a firm intellectual stand nor try to defend their views. This is merely ignorance at play. These people are unable to defy traditions because they are entangled in superstition. They may even fear being cast out by their jat, or caste, or panchayat. Or they think it is their duty to support fortune tellers, pujaris, priests and the like. The number of such believers is huge. While one can understand why they believe in god, it is not possible to engage in a specific argument

with them about the existence of god because they believe there is no need to discuss their stand.

Another category of people includes those who are generally indifferent to any debate on the topic of god. This group maintains that a belief in god is a psychological need. They feel it is beneficial for both the individual and society. According to them, god loves and protects us and blesses us with good sense. He treasures devotion and imbues us with strength. At times, he punishes us for our sins. He helps us overcome difficulties, no matter how insurmountable they may be. A belief in god makes life happy, they say.

Atheists, on the other hand, are quite unambiguous in their assertion that god doesn't exist at all. They insist that it is an erroneous concept, a falsehood. They think it's a hypothetical idea created by primitive man. Believing that god can help us overcome any crisis is escapism and self-deception, they assert. They are in favour of scientifically analysing the problems of life and facing them with courage. The earlier the human race gets rid of the idea of god, they say, the brighter and more dynamic its future would be.

Atheism is an ancient, independent philosophy, now widespread. The great sceptics of yore have used logical and radical points in all their arguments. They never lost to anyone on the level of ratiocination. At the same time, their views couldn't hold sway over the masses for a prolonged period in any part of the world. A few recent surveys in some countries show an increase in the number of non-believers, though.

The theists offer a different argument. 'All elements, even in their infinitesimal form, have huge amounts of energy. Each form has a specific velocity. But the position and velocity of this infinitesimal form are related and not independent of each other. Mobility isn't rule-bound.' But this line of argument does not hold, nor does it prove the existence of god. It ignores the most important point. The problem whether god exists or not isn't about enormous amounts of energy or the lack thereof. While all five elements boast gargantuan powers, they don't have a mind, will or emotion. This is where god is different.

Many scientists believe in the 'god principle'. But the concept of god as a hypothesis isn't necessary for science. Scientists may believe in god, but science does not.

There are three categories of philosophers who enter into discussions on god. The first comprises those who stand by the holy scriptures—sages and saints, preceptors of various religious orders, and followers. What's interesting is that in any debate on god, the texts aren't given much significance.

The second category of people believes in mystic revelation, not logical thinking. The fundamental proof of divine rule, they feel, is what the heart experiences. Texts and reasoning, for them, are not the core testimonies. Sole reliance on holy books makes the concept of god unsound. Revelation alone can remove all doubt on the existence of god, they say.

The third category includes philosophers who use reason to bolster their arguments. Many of them were in the West—Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Locke. They found inspiration in traditional religious sects and argued in support of god.

The philosophers first made an ontological point. That we can imagine an existence far superior and perfect beyond the visible world. This perfect existence is god. It's possible to think of it because everything we see and experience seems imperfect. From their imperfections, we can picture perfection. That perfect virtuosity is god.

The second argument is cosmological and rests on the universal principle of causality. The philosophers maintain that the place from where the chain of cause and effect begins is god.

The third argument is that the construction of the universe is harmonious. Consider, for example, the human body. The eyes, ears, nose and various organs are in perfect sync with each other. Only a perfect, talented craftsman can create such a structure. This also applies to animals, the solar system, and every substance on Earth. Whatever we see, none of it is discordant. So the creator of the universe has to be an omniscient, omnipotent artist.

Immanuel Kant refuted all these arguments. The German philosopher proposed an ethics-based counter to prove the existence of god. He said that, despite their moral behaviour, so many people remain poor and suffer in pain and grief. But there are scores of criminals who are happy and lead a life of luxury. This irony indicates that justice and morality have no place in this world. Yet humans are moral. Man has a pure discretionary intellect in his heart, which results in his steadfastness to pure

morality. Secularism, though, cannot provide any such justification for pure moral behaviour. Even when you concede that 'truth prevails in the end', you have to assume that 'in the end' means 'after death'. If there's a judgement on morality or criminality at this point, it means life exists post-death. This translates into the existence of the immortal soul. The one who sees everything, who is omnipotent and fair, and provides justice to immortal souls is god.

The Discovery Institute in Seattle has proposed the intelligent design (ID) movement. It is an outcome of the many and varied propositions offered to prove the existence of god. The movement maintains that modern science cannot unravel the mysteries of the universe. The world's organic, physical and chemical structure has seen copious changes over millennia and will always do so. Even Darwin's theory has been unable to do justice to the clutter and complexity involved. So, all these events must have emanated from an omnipotent invisible power at the helm. To solve the puzzle of the universe, the institute recommends you study the concept of ID along with Darwin's findings.

Many parents in the USA support the inclusion of ID in their children's education. Scientists, though, oppose the move. They feel the concept introduces religion and theism into curricula and robs children of the opportunity to develop a rational outlook.

Science depends on objectivity, hypotheses and experiential evidence, not on popular opinion. Because ID is an intangible theory, one can't observe or experiment with it. In fact, it fails various verification tests. It doesn't tell us anything about the 'designer' or their intention to create the universe in the first place. It doesn't have any valid proof showing an invisible higher omnipotent power.

Here's another argument. Because the world seems to have a plan and structure, it has to have a planner or builder behind it, viz. god. Science, though, can reveal all the natural laws that have led to this plan and structure. There is no need to credit an invisible entity for it. Also, what is this planner or builder busy with during a deluge, tempest, famine or earthquake, you may ask. Science attributes these to the principle of causality, which ID supporters shoot down. An inviolable natural law, causality is provable through evidence and experiments. But ID has no

element of causality. Science has several questions for the supporters of this movement. If god has created the universe, does the process of creation continue or has it stopped? What's the next step after the creation of the universe? Nobody has any answers to these.

Rationalists have challenged all the above arguments by theists. Moral values can be upheld in society without god or religious rituals. Seeking pleasure and joy is man's instinctive drive, but he also understands the need to serve others. He knows that he should behave unto others as he would like them to behave with him. Man does care about ethics and morality. The concept of god isn't necessary to inculcate a love for the environment or humanity. Whether someone is useless or reliable doesn't depend on their belief or disbelief in god. Their worth is evident through their talk, conduct and interactions.

The concept of god is popular worldwide for three reasons. First, it's considered the best formula for overcoming fear, helplessness and insecurity. Second, it's deemed vital for one's happiness. And third, it's said to be the ticket to eternal bliss. The concept offers simplified answers to every question on Earth. These answers attract people. Human thinking and understanding propose alternative and convincing solutions to these concerns, though. They even show how to put these solutions into practice. One of them is the development of a democratic, humanitarian organisation.

The desire to boost happiness by appeasing god is nothing but consumerism. Those who indulge in such practices should remember Gandhiji's words. 'The world has enough for everyone's need, but not enough for everyone's greed.' We have limited resources, whereas human wants are innumerable. Limitless, unrestricted consumption will leave a barren Earth for future generations. Those who beg god for even more pleasures should bear this in mind.

Contrary to popular opinion, the concept of god cannot relieve one from the cycle of birth and death. Nor can it endow one with eternal bliss. You can only achieve true bliss by engaging in a worthy cause and persisting in it. The resulting feeling of satisfaction can only be an outcome of your efforts—a mere belief in god cannot bring it about.

As per rationalists across the world, taking apart the concept

of god is the only way to eradicate superstition. For them, being neutral to the topic of god is capitulating out of fear. Some of them are aware that grassroots bodies such as ANiS have to take a flexible stand on these matters. They understand our need to avoid public wrath. Theist opponents, on the other hand, feel this view of ours signifies our lack of power to execute our real aim. They think we will start atheist propaganda once we gain strength.

In all these disparate but fervent opinions, the real stand of bodies such as ANiS on the concept of god gets lost. Our position on this topic is appropriate, scientific and in line with our cause. Whenever anyone asks us about our belief in god, we dismiss the question as irrelevant. We add that the question lacks a concrete definition of 'god'. Analyse our answer, and you'd know how to approach the concept while working to end superstition.

When a person asks someone whether they believe in god or not, they don't factor in the various meanings of 'god'. Each of these connotations—related to an individual's respective perception of god—is significant. Some of them are acceptable, some aren't, while a few others are ambiguous. Moreover, every person has different answers to this question. So, to examine the concept of god, we need to consider all its interpretations.

The first meaning sees god as the 'creator', as believed by Mahatma Phule, for instance. If someone stated this view two centuries ago, we would have shrugged at it. But now, science has shown how the solar system and Earth were born. You don't need the hypothesis of god to understand this process of creation.

But if you ask us, 'Who created the universe,' we'd say that modern science is yet to answer this question. We can form two hypotheses here:

a) God created the universe,
b) The universe came into being on its own out of causality.

Science will back the second one when it's proven. Right now, our stand is agnostic, as the question doesn't have a valid answer yet.

Theists, of course, swear by the first hypothesis. Their rationale is that wherever there is a creation—paper, pen, table, chair, etc.—it ought to have a creator. In the case of the

universe, they say the creator is god. Those who proffer this argument forget that we can turn it back on them. The creator has to be a creation too, so who created them? Our opponents respond that the creator is self-born and self-extant. Which means that god is bound by causality. So, they have to conclude that the universe is self-governed by causality.

Aren't god's self-born status and adherence to causality contradictory? Let's clarify this with a simple example. We have a clock and don't know who's made it. But we can acknowledge that the rules of a clock began to apply to it upon its creation. The clock doesn't slow down if its maker walks slower than before, or speed up whenever he or she sprints. The clock won't ring an alarm if its maker sneezes, or stop working if he or she dies. In short, the world follows the rule of cause and effect. It doesn't care about the endless discourse on the topic of creation. God plays no role in running the causality-bound universe.

The second connotation of god is that of a controller. Meaning, whatever happens in the universe does so only by his will. Even the tiny leaf of a plant cannot move unless he wills it. He is the sole doer and maker.

ANiS rejects this stand. Let's face it, the world is rife with discrimination and injustice. Everywhere, we come across lives and properties destroyed by natural disasters. The atom bomb burns out thousands in a moment. A vicious Hitler slaughtered six million human beings. If the all-benevolent god controls everything, why does he let such cruelty happen? But these calamities do strike the world unabated. So, we have to conclude that god is neither the controller nor able to control the world. This is as good as refuting his omnipotence.

Almost all religions believe that nothing in the world is unknown to god. That all armies and weaponry of all nations put together are a trifle compared to his power. Moreover, the power of the benevolent god is only meant to do and bring good to the world. A critical examination of this concept reveals its internal discrepancy. How does god allow atrocities on women? If he cannot stand these crimes, yet isn't able to stop them, it's because he doesn't come to know about them. Thus, god isn't omniscient. Also, the perpetrators prove to be more powerful. So, there goes the whole omnipotence theory out of the window. And what if, despite being aware of the violence and capable of

stopping it, god was indifferent to it? This conclusion puts god's benevolent image in doubt.

Another popular ideology is that god is formless and without attributes. He is devoid of any colour, countenance, etc. He doesn't walk, move or talk. He is omnipresent, yet not palpable. He is nowhere, yet one can feel him everywhere. Now, the question is: does it matter whether a god that doesn't do anything whatsoever exists or not? ANiS doesn't have anything to say about this. Let him exist for those who think he does, and let him not for those who feel otherwise. The Samiti is of the opinion that this dry, endless discourse leads us nowhere.

Another notion about god is that his nature is satchidananda —sat, truth; chit, eternal; anand, bliss. Thus, god is true, eternal and pure joy. All those who insist on a god of this nature have every right to believe in and worship him. There are many who don't ask god for anything. They feel joy and satisfaction in contemplating and worshipping him. In what way an individual seeks happiness should be their own decision. Some derive pleasure from a morning walk, while a few enjoy swimming. Let those who feel joy and happiness in the shadow of god praise him by all means. Every human being has the right to do what he or she likes, provided it's legal and harmless. At the same time, one should avoid neglecting one's duty in the pursuit of happiness. Nobody should ever feel that their ways of worship are superior to anybody else's. Everyone should know that criticism of their behaviour or an opinion that conflicts with theirs isn't always an attack on their beliefs.

Humans also seek god as a support system for their lives. In the words of the saints, 'Wherever I go, you're my companion who holds my hand and guides me.' A student, before leaving for an exam, prays for success with folded hands. A doctor asks for a complicated surgery to go well. Both the student and the doctor are set to face the unknown, which causes the mind to become anxious. With a bit of reassurance, the mind can calm down, and the student and the doctor can gain confidence.

Faith in god is a useful mental prop in such circumstances. One can utilise the concept of god here as a psychological support to stabilise the nervous mind. But one needs to understand that clearing an exam is impossible if you only pray and don't prepare for it. For a successful surgery, one must have

the skills, apparatus and sterilised instruments. Praying isn't a substitute for any of these. Its sole benefit in these cases is that it helps reduce mental strain and calms the mind.

The concept of god can be well utilised at the mental level in two more ways. Say, a counsellor only explains the nature of your problem to you. They don't put you under any clear-cut line of treatment. Apart from finding another counsellor, you could turn to god—available 24x7 for free. What's interesting is that god won't drop any solutions into your lap either. But you end up with a calm, composed mind, which you can use to concentrate on your problem. Soon, solutions may start to strike you.

To understand the second way, picture a shock absorber. The jerks from potholes can ruin even the sturdiest vehicle if it has no shock absorbers. Not to mention cause injuries to the passenger. Similarly, a capable person, too, can experience many a disappointment in life. Things may not pan out as one wishes them to, and one may not know why. The mind then seeks refuge in the shock absorber called belief in god to save itself from a breakdown. That's how it tries to gain the strength to face difficulties.

Here's another perception of god. Many people pledge a laundry list of 'gifts' or 'rewards' to a deity. These are always in exchange for the fulfilment of their endless desires. A well-known intellectual from Maharashtra has described this tendency in an interesting way. 'A student promises to offer sweets worth twenty rupees to an idol of Ganesha if he tops his exams. What the student means is, "Dear Lord, if I had studied through the year, I wouldn't have come to you. But I've wasted my time on pranks and shenanigans and neglected my preps. Oh, god, please don't punish me but bless me with a good score. I'm tempting you with a bribe of delicious pedas that cost me twenty rupees so that you fulfil my wish. To be honest, Gajanana, I think you are corrupt and silly. Being an idol, you won't eat any of those sweets. But I will polish them off immediately after offering them to you, and you won't even find out!"'

To see god as someone you can bribe with something, in return for something else, is a devaluation of the concept of god. This attitude brings him down to the level of a corrupt employee. It goes without saying that ANiS rejects such rubbish.

Some people view god as a performer of wondrous miracles. This is completely unacceptable to ANiS. A miracle means an occurrence or phenomenon that doesn't adhere to causality. To believe that such a thing can happen is against a citizen's duty of upholding a scientific outlook. Not asking for causality as a proof even goes against the Constitution of India.

Another revered form of the concept of god is that it's synonymous with ethical behaviour. Have a look at this abhang:

> The distressed and the tormented;
> He calls them his own;
> He is the Saint;
> In him resides God.

Here's what the saints say:

> The Holy Waters are just boulders and water;
> True God is in virtuous men.

Both expose the futility of searching for god in shrines. If there is god, he is present in people of high morals.

The saints and social reformers of Maharashtra have always been preaching this message. One of them was Gadge Maharaj. On his annual pilgrimage (wari) to Pandharpur, he never observed a fast like other devotees. Nor did he visit the temple of Vithoba. Instead, he would clean the banks of the Chandrabhaga, dirtied by visitors during the day. Later, at night, he would address devotees on the sands of those banks. His sermons were in the nature of a dialogue. They would shock his listeners' intellect and help them realise what's right.

Here's an instance of a conversation:

Gadge Maharaj *(to the devotees)* **:** Have you seen god?

Devotees: Yes, we have.

Gadge Maharaj: Where does your god live?

The devotees: Our god lives in the temple. He rests his hands on his waist and stands on a brick. He is dark-skinned.

Gadge Maharaj: Oh, is he? Your god resides in the

temple? My god lives in my mind.

Gadge Maharaj *(to the confused devotees in his mischievous Varhadi dialect)* **:** Does your god bathe?

Devotees: Yes, he does.

Gadge Maharaj: Who bathes your god?

Devotees: We bathe him ourselves.

Gadge Maharaj: What kind of a god do you have? He can't even bathe himself! How can he bathe you in the shower of good fortune? Alright, does your god wear a dhoti?

Devotees: Yes, he does.

Gadge Maharaj: Who ties it onto your god?

Devotees: We do it.

Gadge Maharaj: Your god is unable to wear a dhoti on his own! How can he clothe you with the garment of luck? Okay, do you offer food to your god?

Devotees: Yes, we do.

Gadge Maharaj: What do you do with the food that you offer to your god?

Devotees: We sit there with a stick.

Gadge Maharaj: Why with a stick?

Devotees: To shoo away the dogs and crows that gather to eat the food.

Gadge Maharaj: See, how can this god, who is unable to guard even the food offered to him, protect your lives?

The devotees go silent.

Gadge Maharaj: Has anyone seen a living god? A god that is alive?

Devotees *(confused and lost)* **:** Baba, we haven't seen any living god.

Sometimes, a tanned man would come along with Gadge Maharaj. He had a white beard, walked barefoot and wore khadi clothes.

Gadge Maharaj *(pointing to the man)* **:** Look at Bhaurao

> Patil. He teaches untouchable children. Call him god. Look at Gandhi Baba, who struggles so hard for our country. Call him god. Educate the ignorant. Tend to the sick. Provide a roof to the homeless. Serve the distressed and the tormented. Be kind to animals. Bapaho *(meaning 'my respected parents'—this is how he'd address his devotees)* , you'll find god in these actions. Remember, god doesn't live in the temple. He occupies your mind. What stays in the temple is the stomach of the priest.

ANiS believes that people's morality finds expression in their ability to reason. The Samiti respects those who see god in the manifestation of the ethical mind. It believes that the creation of an ethical society is the need of the day.

The Samiti wants to work within the framework of the Constitution. It also respects people's sentiments about the concept of god. At the same time, the Samiti wants to be able to criticise the concept and express its opinion, even if the opinion is an unpopular one. Both are its constitutional rights.

Our answer to 'Does an individual believe in god?' depends on the meaning of god that the questioner holds. If the questioner considers god to be the creator of the universe, the Samiti's stand will be agnostic. If it's god as the creator, controller and governor of the universe, the Samiti will oppose these tags. It has no interest in discussing the concept of a shapeless god sans attributes. Also, the concept of an omniscient, omnipotent, benevolent god is full of contradictions, which the Samiti is keen to discuss with the larger public. Those who want to conceive of god as a source of bliss and joy have every right to do so. If you view god as a psychological support, counsellor, or shock absorber, the Samiti will not react to that belief. However, it rejects the idea that god performs miracles and accepts bribes. It welcomes those who feel that god is evident through ethical thoughts and actions. It would love to have a dialogue with these believers! The Samiti, though, does not find it necessary to perceive god even in this form. A person's moral conduct stems from their own reason and intellect. It's not due to the 'voice of god' or any religious command.

ANiS's stance on god and the scientific basis for it

If you consider the way the concept of god gets rooted in our psyche, it becomes clear that ANiS's stance on the subject is scientifically sound. The ideas that a child sees, hears and imbibes enter her inner mind. The child's critical mind develops after she is six or seven years old. Before that, the child accepts whatever she is told, without any critical thinking. Everywhere—at home, in school, in her neighbourhood—the child picks up beliefs on god. Thus, the concept of god fixes itself firm and deep in the child's mind.

Each religion has its own way of inculcating its beliefs. But there is one instruction common to all. One must practise good things—'God wants us to do so.' And one must avoid bad deeds, as 'God abhors them and punishes us for committing them.' Believers should wake up at dawn, respect their parents, observe cleanliness and help others. That's how god likes it. Children are also told to not lie, quarrel with or hit anyone, and so on. Why? Because god will punish them for doing so.

A child's mind is like a brand-new computer without any intellect of its own. A computer performs according to the program you feed into it. When you feed the concept of god into a child's mind, it becomes part of his or her inner mind. Later, when the child is faced with the thought that god might not exist, her mind revolts against it. That's because the notion is incongruous with her deep-rooted ideas. The child may fight or flee from the situation. She is unlikely to listen to this new thought or think it over. So, it doesn't matter in the slightest how logical the stand that 'god does not exist' sounds. The child's mind would be completely closed to any diverging thought on god.

At times, even if the concept of god is dislodged from the intellect, the mind isn't prepared to practise the new thought. Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar would ask his community to stop seeking god in stones and boulders. 'Throw away these stones that you have worshipped all these years like gods. They aren't gods at all.' Lakhs of people obeyed this command and converted to Buddhism. His words, though, couldn't make its way into their inner minds. Hordes of his followers gather in Nagpur on the day of Dhamma Chakra Parivartan. They visit, without fail, Gajanan

Maharaj of Shegaon on their way there or while returning home. The idols of the deities they worshipped before their conversion are still found in their homes. That's because they couldn't expel the old concept rooted in their minds.

What can we do in this case? The Samiti has plans and actions that work on an altogether different approach. This has received a slow but positive response over the years. The aim is to foster a scientific outlook, rationalism and constructive criticism of religion. In a sense, we provide a searchlight to an individual. It isn't bright enough to dispel all ignorance and superstition from the individual's mind in one go. But the beam of light is powerful enough to help them examine their beliefs and change their mind. Even if this process is gradual and takes time, it's alright.

No one is required to first give up the concept of god before joining the Samiti as a member. But we've seen people progress in the right direction at their own pace when they hold the right thoughts. They become self-dependent and get rid of the concept of god at the mental level. It's a slow process. This path adopted by the Samiti is a scientific, democratic way of approaching the concept of god.

2

Religion

ANiS's work attracts a lot of discussion, and even controversy. This is not surprising because our work is related to what people call 'religious faith'.

One's understanding of faith needs to be in line with the times. For that, it is important to know the meaning of the word 'religion', or perhaps the word 'dharma'.

Dharma has various connotations and usages. The wind's dharma is to blow, while the sun's is to shine. In this context, dharma refers to the distinctive characteristic of a particular thing. When a child's dharma is to respect his parents, it is his duty to do so. Offering water to the thirsty and protection to the weak is also dharma. Here, it stands for moral obligation. When my dharma is Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist or any other, I'm talking about my way of worship and faith.

While forming their stand on religion, an ANiS activist has to bear in mind all these meanings of dharma. In any case, they should be aware that religion is a man-made social system.

Dominance of religion

Religion has a special place in human cultures. As far back as the primitive era, human beings have had religion in some form or another. Compared to this, the rise and evolution of scientific outlook is only 400 years old.

Organised religion, too, is several centuries older than scientific outlook. It was an all-encompassing, powerful force with unchallenged dominance in daily life. It had held its unparalleled influence for a long time before the emergence of science.

When people are born into a particular religion, they imbibe its beliefs right from childhood. As children, they aren't capable of true criticism. But as adults, they may start comparing their religion with other faiths. And thus begins the deliberation on religion.

In reality, many people don't reflect on religion this way. They continue to observe rituals, read sacred texts and travel on pilgrimages without understanding their relevance or significance. This deepens the impressions formed during their childhood. Given the satisfying effect of these practices on the mind, people find them beneficial and don't see anything objectionable in them. If anyone has a different opinion, they see it as an attack on their views.

Why criticism of religion?

Every religion is trying to boost its pride, pre-eminence, earnestness and self-importance in some way or another—unintentionally or otherwise. At times, these endeavours assume the form of hatred and contempt for other religions.

Our saints tried to direct religious sentiments towards morality. But the current effervescence of religiosity is heading towards fanaticism. Religious sentiments are commercialised, merchandised, distorted and politicised. Crores of rupees go into fuelling them in all forms. An entire community begins to seek influence in shrines, pilgrimages, sermons and festivals.

The processions of Gajanana, the god of intellect, are a perfect example of this development. One can see how drunken hooligans throw all prudence to the wind in these.

Religion, like almost all else, has become commercialised in today's atmosphere. But it doesn't stop there. To celebrate festivals, organisers don't hesitate to collect funds from anti-social powers. They exalt and dignify these powers in return.

Entering the field of politics ought to require the aspirant to work hard and resolve the problems of the masses. Instead, they adopt a convenient shortcut to power by inciting and fanning religious sentiments. Bringing down a house of prayer can become a huge issue in the elections of the subcontinent. In today's Maharashtra, religious pride easily takes the pedestal and pushes thought into the background.

ANiS's philosophy goes hand-in-hand with religion at every step. Hence, criticism of religion is one of its key responsibilities —especially in its activities at the grassroots level.

All religions tend to believe in a marvellous supernatural power. Only a few people go seeking this force. For those who seek power, religious sentiments have become an instrument for gaining political weightage. This lot includes self-appointed guardians of various religions. Some of them believe all Muslims should unite under pan-Islamism. A few think Jews worldwide should form an international union and strengthen Israel. Many want Hindus to build their own nation. These separatist tendencies are growing each day, creating tension and instability all around.

This new parochial religious sentiment is as strong and acute as the old one, and is strengthened by traditional family and community values. It relies on the strength of unity and brute force. In the case of Hindus, for example, religious sentiments manifest through castes. So, people converge on the basis of their castes and sub-castes and fight for what they see as their cause. In these circumstances, if the basic needs of people were fulfilled, it would act as a check. It is only then that unhealthy religious sentiments will see a dip.

Another strand of thought wants class struggle to replace religious conflict, but it hasn't succeeded in gaining, or perhaps retaining, traction. Mumbai has always been famous for the class struggle of its labourers. But the city has also been under a religion-based organisation for decades. Attributing the failure of the movement to a lack of training among workers is a lame excuse. The problem deserves an assiduous investigation.

What about Jyotiba, Shahu Maharaj, Vitthal Ramji Shinde, Dr Ambedkar and Gadge Baba? Aren't their thoughts influential? Aren't these luminaries respected? Why don't their teachings impact state policy? Maharashtra has also had critical thinkers such as Lokahitawadi, Justice Ranade and Pandita Ramabai. What about their thoughts, inferences and actions?

People may or may not agree with these intellectuals, but there's no denying that they all investigated religion with sincerity. They made social religion pro-society and mystical religion secular. They shifted the focus of religion from god to man. But corruption and hidden agendas have taken over proper,

scientific education. We need the constructive criticism practised by these luminaries.

The Samiti stresses on Articles 25, 26, 27 and 28 of the Constitution of India, which provide for secularism as well as freedom of worship. The courts may restrict this freedom during issues of morality or law and order. It may also curtail it when there are threats to national integrity or public health. The Samiti spreads awareness on these laws and insists on their observance.

One of them is the law against the custom of devadasi. Approved in 2006 in its more stringent form, it prohibits any individual from marrying a deity. It doesn't care whether one is of a legal marriageable age or not. The law considers this religious observance as detrimental to public morality. Especially because most devadasis are pushed into prostitution in the name of religion.

Our Constitution requires citizens to uphold and reinforce progressive reform and a scientific outlook. Criticism of religion, too, is our duty. It helps fulfil the responsibilities of reformation and instilling a scientific outlook. Scriptures tell us to immerse Ganesh idols in flowing water. But on a large scale, the plaster of paris and chemical colours used in idol-making pose an environmental problem. Here, criticism of religion and alternative ways of immersion become obligatory. That's how people can realise the two responsibilities.

Progressive reform and a scientific outlook are beneficial to society. They appeal to human consciousness. But the self-styled guardians of religion oppose reform and science. What's the solution for this?

To begin with, we need to understand religion. The ideal definition of religion is 'that which sustains society'. But such a religion doesn't exist. Then who or what sustains society? Does such sustenance even exist?

Religious reform can only come about when the religion itself accepts that it doesn't sustain society. But, in reality, every religion claims to do so. Religious leaders consider their own religion as the ideal one and create an illusion of the same. They're closed to criticism and label it sacrilegious. The intellectual treachery involved here goes unnoticed even by the educated.

But can any religion call itself ideal? Who should decide whether a given religion is ideal? In case it isn't, who should reform it? No religion will allow the raising of such irreligious or anti-religious questions.

You know who's in charge of sustaining Indian society? It's the Constitution, its laws, and the administration. But no religious person wants to recognise the Constitution as a holy text. Nobody takes constitutional commands as religion. ANiS is keen to undertake a constructive criticism of religion. Unfortunately, a large section of the public, swayed by religious indoctrination, equates its criticism with heresy.

Herein lies the distinctiveness and strength of ANiS's neutral stand on religion. Rationalists want the complete abandonment of the concept of religion. Marxists want to show people the deceptive concept of religion to save them from exploitation. They don't care about the criticism of religion, and what can end exploitation. No wonder religious people turn their backs on the two groups.

ANiS does not expect its activists to give up their religions before joining. But yes, we don't permit rituals of any religion on our platform. The Samiti, too, as an organisation, does not take part in any religious event. Our activists are free to decide for themselves when it comes to religiosity and rituals.

The Samiti engages in the constructive criticism of religious sentiments and employs action-oriented programmes for the same. That's why the so-called custodians of religion oppose ANiS with all their might. Our criticism strikes at the very roots of their claims.

Faith in magic

The initial religious sentiment among primitive human beings was magic, or yatu. They believed that everything had the yatu principle—humans, animals, objects. They called for worshipping it with yatukriya, or magical practices. Examples include the fire sacrifice for rain, the rite for an enemy's defeat, festivals of village deities. Yatudharma, a magic-based religion, evolved out of this.

Magic was of two types. Practices meant to benefit one and their family were shukla yatu, or white magic. Acts aimed at

killing or tormenting someone were krishna yatu, or black magic. Call it sorcery, evil spells, bhanamati or witchcraft—it's all black magic. These are exploitative, worthless activities that waste time, money, effort and intellect. They are bona fide superstitions. With the spread of science and modernity, they should have died by now. People should have given up their faith in the religion of magic.

Attempts to abolish black magic haven't been successful, though. In 2005, the proposed Maharashtra (Eradication of Black Magic, Evil and Aghori Practices) Bill came about. Many political parties—the self-styled protectors of Hinduism—made a hue and cry about it. They called the legislation anti-Hindu. No wonder these exploitative practices still find a pivotal place in religion and society.

Take the simple example of building a house. Even educated people in today's times conduct a pooja on the plot they have acquired to oust any 'evil powers' that reside there. Later, they hang a black doll in a corner, or lime and chilli in the door frame, and perform 'vastu shanti'. If the family tradition demands it, they may sacrifice an animal. Weddings, too, aren't spared from chants, spells and other magical devices. All these are nothing but yatu concepts. And they're the norm everywhere, be it among men or women, literate or illiterate, villages or cities.

Maharashtra boasts a legacy of social reformers, but it has zero interest in understanding the philosophical essence of religion. Religious faith is traditional faith based on magic. The faithful expect their faith to keep mishaps away and bring them merit, or punya. But the message of the saints is different. They considered purity of heart as the most important virtue. They did their appointed work and dedicated it to god. They endorsed caring, compassionate behaviour and walked their talk. But this novel path couldn't displace traditional magic. Nor could it influence people to discard it.

Source of the power of religion

Scientific thinking can raise the necessary questions, such as whether a yatu-dominated religion or another such age-old principle of religious philosophy, can be proven to have a basis

in reality. These questions are pertinent. However, this is not enough; one should have a proper sociological understanding of the tremendous power of religion. One should know where religion derives its power from.

Religious experience and behaviour influence human culture. It captivated the human mind for thousands of years. As per psychology, religious thoughts, though not rooted in logic, retain their social importance down the generations. Some part of human life remains beyond the ambit of reason. So, man's experience is dual by nature. One is the perception of objects and phenomena in the surroundings through his sensory organs. The other, believers say, is the religious, spiritual and personal experience of the 'beyond'.

Religion thrives on rituals that are performed to mitigate the fear of calamities and benefit the individual. They have seen thousands of years of impact on the impressionable unconscious mind. Indisputable logical arguments affect only the conscious mind. So, people find the illusory world of religion that occupies their unconscious minds truer than what they observe through their senses. They once trusted that magic could open the gates to that world.

One should consider two more social aspects. The fear of the unknown and the urge to satisfy unfulfilled desires open up a world of unrestrained gratification. These drive people towards the religion of magical rituals and the concept of the 'beyond'. Both exist just as strongly as they did during the time of primitive man, but in different forms today.

Man is fond of company and society. When he is in a group, he behaves as it does. His reasoning and discernment reduce to adjust to the group's ideology. He is ready to accept unexamined concepts. This tendency is known as group mind.

From birth to death, man is part of different groups. Their power influences every bit of his mind.

Important events such as births, weddings and funerals have their own rituals. So do occasions such as Sankranti, Bhaubeej and Raksha Bandhan. The human mind approves of rituals that are necessary for a healthy society and promote a love for festivals and bonding. At the same time, there are unnecessary, senseless rituals that promote superstition. They exist due to a group mind. Nobody can muster the courage to get rid of them.

It's the force of social sanctions that intimidates the human mind, not 'divine command'. Sanctions, prohibitions and rituals are a creation of society. It takes a lot of strength from one who loves their society if he or she wants to rebel against mindless, harmful rituals. Religion, thus, encompasses the entire human life, held together by human instinct. This is why religion is much more influential than any other social institution. Its hold is universal.

Obsolete religious rituals

Customs and traditions are religiosity in practice. Various methods of worship, priesthood and rituals, are examples of this. They also include values such as non-violence, truth and non-appropriation. The entire gamut of these values and customs together forms a religion. The religiosity that results from it then occupies the minds of individuals and society.

While working to eradicate superstition and promote secularism, one needs to mull over religion and psychology. Customs and traditions that have been built up and fortified in the name of religion later become predicaments in its progress. We can cite a number of such common reactionary customs, which don't usually face any objections. Kanyadaan is one obnoxious example. How can one treat a daughter like an object and 'give her away' to a groom? Another example is disallowing widows from attending auspicious functions. Why should they face the punishment for their husband's demise? Let's also include the practice of pind daan. Relatives of the deceased spend hours waiting for a crow to touch the pind (rice balls) when they should be valuing time in the fast-paced present life. Around five to ten kilos of rice, called akshata, goes into showering a newlywed couple. The word 'talaq' said thrice can dissolve even a long-standing marriage. Some men refuse to provide alimony or maintenance to their former wives after divorce. Adoption is still frowned upon. Should one let such customs continue as valid religious practices? Shouldn't we object to them?

Abstract ethics and corrupt practices

Man's relationship with his god is the real subject matter of

religion. As a result, religion and morality are conjoined topics. Many cannot imagine morality without religion. And yet, morality is in no direct way related to religion. The concept of morality will not die in the absence of religion. In fact, almost every religion has indulged in many an immoral and cruel act. World history has countless episodes of battles and wars spurred by religious compulsions. Many a bloodshed and human slaughter has occurred in the name of religion. The most dreadful outcome of these horrors is that they've become a matter of pride for the perpetrators. Why? Because they think they've acted to defend their religion. Their acts are supposedly religious and, therefore, quite moral!

Truth, non-violence, equity, compassion, mercy, tolerance and so on are universal principles of ethics. But their application in social life is a bit contrary. Reiterating them as one's code of conduct is easy. But people forget one thing here. Social morality needs regular updating for improvement. Because nobody is working to bring about this change, society ends up providing religious sanction to immorality within the system. This internal contradiction is present in all religions, especially Hinduism.

Hindu saints and philosophers never considered that untouchability, enslavement of women and all-round exploitation of Shudras are serious matters of immorality. The centuries-old exploitation of the toiling masses by landowners, moneylenders, priests, kings and administrative systems is sheer immorality. But the wise, responsible and religious people of those days never recognised the plight of the downtrodden. Social life was full of internal contradiction.

The same social conditions prevail to this day. It is, therefore, necessary to critically examine the forces that advocate the use of religion to make society moral.

This intertwined nature of religion and morality has influenced the Hindu mind in a peculiar way. Hindus adhere to an ethical code in their personal life but are indifferent to social morality. They are particular about personal cleanliness and that of their home, but are indifferent to the heap of garbage on the road. In fact, they add the litter from their own house to it without a thought.

Our society is rife with corruption and blatant selfishness at every step. The orthodox blame the loss of religious faith for it.

They think people behave the way they do because moral restrictions sanctioned by religion aren't obligatory. But the dire reality everywhere, in every religion, is that the corrupt are the foremost in observing traditional religious practices. They go on pilgrimages, practise charity, perform religious rites and observances. They have little or nothing to do with the pure, ethical side of religion. That's why a society drowning in corruption also extols religion without restraint. It isn't ordinary people but the so-called religious leaders who don't think it is wrong to use religion to seek their self-interest.

Social ills aren't due to a loss of faith in religion. Their roots lie in the complex situation created by the current economic and societal structure, and the fallout of it all. Those who want to improve the moral fabric of society through religiosity have every right to do so. But we should keep an eye on their behaviour. We need to propagate secular, scientific and humanitarian values and ways of thinking. Society must accept such values and modes of thought. Only then can it become a moral world.

Rituals and sacerdotalism (purohitshahi)

Rituals are expressions of religious customs and traditions. They are present in every human culture, and are manifestations of the mutual exchange of ideas and instinctive feelings of gratitude. But some of them promote exploitation and follow false narratives. They deserve opposition. According to Dr Ambedkar, mindless rituals have impoverished our country.

There's an ancient tome that prescribes 700 rituals that Hindus need to perform in a year. Do you think you'd have time for anything else?

What's the harm in observing rituals, you may ask. Well, a lot. Individuals, as well as society at large, put important duties and tasks on the backburner in order to follow rituals. They neglect essential intellectual and secular pursuits. This is a retrograde step for society. Research activity stagnates, poverty rises, business and financial operations suffer. Only the rich with nothing to do can afford this luxury and have the privilege of attaining moksha, or salvation.

Rituals disrupt life. They make one self-centred and confine

one to the thoughts of the other world. Rituals only benefit the priestly class.

Our saints, who believed in one god, never felt the need for rituals. Remembering god and reciting his name was all the devotion they felt the need for. The point here is whether you practise morality and benevolence in your daily life. Rituals performed without these feelings are of no use.

Rituals with moral discipline at the core are called 'vrata'. They stand for a self-imposed lifelong observance of, say, truthfulness or non-violence. One should examine the rituals of a religion that are based on these virtues.

Religion involves a sacerdotal (purohitshahi) aspect as well. As per this system, you can only connect with god through a network of middlemen called priests or purohits. Offerings made to god pass through these agents. They partake of your offerings and enjoy them.

The sacerdotal system prevails in almost all religions. The rationale proffered here is that you need a trained, seasoned person to help you connect with god. Needless to say, there is no substance to this argument or belief.

Let us assume for the time being that god exists. The magnanimous nature that is innate to god means he doesn't need a middleman. Moreover, these middlemen hail from a single caste. If worshipping god is a discipline or profession, there needs to be proper course for priesthood. Whoever clears this course, irrespective of their caste or gender, should bag the job. Dr Ambedkar demanded such a course long back in 1927.

Religious ethics and reason

Patrons and promoters of religion claim that ethics is an important part of religion. They say that the concept of morality develops in the human mind because of religion. The fear of immoral behaviour is due to religion. It helps one feel brave enough to not deviate from morality, even if the entire world is against them. Organised religion arose to establish ethical behaviour. And religion did make stray attempts at it.

Many religionists believe that withdrawing support for religion will push society towards immorality. This assertion throws up two questions. The first is whether one claims to lead

a moral life on the strength of their religious feelings. ANiS respects such people, for it believes that moral living is important. But the circumstances in which moral behaviour occurs can affect morality.

All prophets command us to speak the truth, avoid violence, and have compassion and love for all. Nobody denies the necessity and usefulness of these commands. But when events take an unexpected turn, it may not be possible to follow them. For example, telling the truth is a good virtue. But it may get tricky when it comes to a patient diagnosed with a terminal illness. If a poisonous snake enters a house, one might have to disobey the code of non-violence. Quite often, reconciling the rules of morality with actual practice is difficult. Therefore, it is necessary to evolve a broad principle combining all concepts of morality and removing the aforementioned predicament.

Insisting on strict obedience of these rules of morality means stating that these rules are good and healthy. There can be a difference of opinion on whether one should invariably tell the truth or shun violence in any situation. But there cannot be two opinions on whether a man should behave morally. It's impossible to list out everything that is good and healthy in order to provide people with a handy guide to such behaviours.

A rational examination of even religion-based morality involves knowing the meaning of 'good' and 'healthy'. Gadge Baba stressed upon this aspect of religious morality, and that is the second question mentioned above. He equated religion with feeding the hungry, pouring water for the thirsty, educating the ignorant, providing a roof for the displaced, nursing and treating the sick, and protecting animals. Traditional religious morality should be influenced by this humanitarian version.

The humanitarian values endorsed by various religions and their followers can simply be regarded as human values. A healthy allegiance to society, ethics, justice, equality and brotherhood are all virtues that don't need any sanction or support from religion. Every individual—religious or otherwise—knows that they can improve human life. And the best way to do it is through a sense of morality guided by rationalism. The Samiti, though, welcomes even those who say they're led by religious morality, but walk the moral path honestly.

Comprehensive rational alternative

The science of societal management is an important alternative to religion. That's because the core of religion is connected to the 'other world'. When you ask anyone what their religion is, it's akin to saying, 'What path do you follow to achieve your spiritual beatitude? Is it Vedic, Buddhist, Jain, Christian or Islamic?' And the person answers accordingly. But dharma doesn't have such a narrow meaning. To illustrate this, let's look at the four purushartha, or objects for the existence of man. These are:

Dharma (acquisition of merit by pious acts),
Artha (pursuit of fame, riches and power),
Kama (enjoyment of sensual pleasures),
Moksha (eventual emancipation).

Now if Dharma included Moksha, there was no need to mention them separately. Think about it.

In the past, 'dharma' actually meant 'the discipline of societal management'. So, it doesn't only stand for customs, traditions, ways of worship, chivalry, courtesy and virtues. When people in this country pronounce their intention to establish a regime of religion here, there is duplicity in their words. Although their public version of religion is 'devotion to moral and cultural values,' their hidden agenda is to control the community using religion as a weapon. During the periods of slavery and feudalism, social management was under religious jurisdiction. But today, it's a political subject, no longer a concern of religion.

The Samiti's neutral stand on religion doesn't mean it will not oppose or criticise efforts to convert India into a religious state. Making people aware of the dangers involved in these strategies is part of ANiS's philosophy. It's also important to thwart plans to base social, economic and political policies on the decisions of a Dharma Sansad (religionists' parliament) established by the saints. The need of the hour is to resist the centuries-old hold that Brahmanical religion has had on political and social activities.

A Supreme Court bench declared that disregarding

secularism is unconstitutional. It is illegal to appeal for votes on religious grounds. If someone is elected on religious grounds, their election is declared null and void because it negates the principle of 'one vote one person one value'.

The polity described in the Manusmriti allows the king to wield his disciplinary power to avoid anarchy. The treatise endorses caste discrimination in all its horrible forms. When a Brahmin commits a crime, it pleads for them to be let off leniently while handing the severest punishment to someone from any of the other varnas. The most inhuman and cruel fates are reserved for the Shudras and the Ati-shudras. But how does Manu define anarchy? As dogs and crows snatching offerings such as payas (milk-based sweets) made for yajnyas. Shudras acquiring power. Intermixing between the varnas. The ninth chapter of Manusmriti calls for a treatment similar to that of the Shudras for women.

This is the attitude reflected by religious leaders trying to wield the disciplinary power of religion to control individuals as well as the community. The religious head of the Bohra community keeps slapping illegitimate fines on believers. The Jain gurus excommunicate sadhvis for using vehicles to travel abroad. It is absolutely necessary to condemn such practices.

It is equally necessary to oppose the reconstruction of India as a Hindu Rashtra. If it happens, what is to be done with the Muslims of the country? They will either be exiled, which is impossible, given their numbers. Or exterminated, which is both unthinkable and unfeasible. Think about seventy-crore Hindus fighting or enslaving Muslims—it is a sure-shot path to anarchy, self-destruction and easy access to weapons.

The obvious solution is to lead a dignified life of cooperation, with justice and brotherhood. ANiS believes in adopting a friendly, constructive stance while dealing with religious people and helping them practise the moral content of their religion. The Samiti also insists on imbibing secularism, living rationally and developing a syncretic alternative to all religions. It encourages the criticism and opposition of all exploitation in the name of religion. We believe that one can lead a worthy, commendable and moral life guided by reason, without practising any religion.

Piety versus impiety

A common argument made to refute the demerits of religion is that they don't apply to a genuine religion. The argument goes that a genuine religion will not discriminate between humans or approve exploitation or violence. All cruelties that have occurred in the name of religion were a perversion of it. Whatever good takes place in the world is only because of genuine faith.

Let's first define a genuine religion. Perhaps one that acknowledges the validity of its religious scriptures? However, because no two people interpret the words of these texts in the same way, we need a better definition. In that case, is it connected to a feeling of piety?

Clearly, the root of religion lies in the distinction between someone pious about the world beyond and someone impious in the world we live in. We tend to keep distinguishing between the pious and the impious. Just as Christ, Buddha and religious gurus are considered superior to the masses, religion also places the pious on a higher level than the impious. Certain persons, trees or even animals are perceived as pious, holy and auspicious. The pious control the conduct of the common, worldly and impious. Without understanding this psychology, one cannot gain insights into the problem of untouchability.

While the caste system dictates division of labour, it also tells us how one caste is pious and another is not. The Brahmins are the most pious of all, and the degree of piety keeps reducing down the line until the system slaps the sticker of impiety on the Shudras and Ati-shudras. Ancient scriptures such as the Manusmriti endorse these beliefs.

Any genuine religion has three categories: pious, impious and secular. Scriptures, priests, temples and animals (such as the cow) are considered pious. Shudras, corpses and menstruating women are impious. Everyday items such as clothes, vegetables, paper and pencils are secular or ordinary. The pious and impious things form the 'alaukik' or strange universe, and secular things the 'laukik' or ordinary universe. Alaukik things are said to possess strange powers, so there are commands and prohibitions governing them.

Pious things overawe us, while impious things generate a contemptuous fear. This means that genuine or true religion

discriminates between things on the basis of superstition. While the laukik things do differ from each other in their inherent characteristics, they don't lead to any discrimination, unlike the concept of piety. Discrimination is based on caprice, customs, traditions and blind belief.

There is no objective criteria to determine whether something is pious or not. Categorising objects is a harmless exercise, provided it's based on qualities such as utility or uselessness, benefits or hazards, hygiene or the lack thereof, and so on. 'Clean, purified water versus unclean, harmful water' is an objective discrimination.

The Rigveda, a book on Balakavi's poetry and a science journal are writings of different kinds. A religious individual would consider the Rigveda as pious or alaukik without a second thought. For them, Balakavi's poems and the science book are mundane things, inferior to the Rigveda. But a secular person would place all three in the laukik category. If they happen to love poetry, they'd pick Balakavi's works over the other two books. Likewise, a person interested in science would prefer the science journal to the other two. An anthropologist would take the Rigveda, not for its piety but research purposes.

Those who say that morality is a product of piety believe that when piety is rejected, morality or true religion will collapse and bring down the orderly life of the community. They need to understand that you sustain society with moral values—piety is not a precondition for it. Again, these values aren't rigid—they change according to circumstances. Beliefs that nurture one's interests unfairly or discriminate between people need to be destroyed. No true religion can impose moral values that support discrimination in the name of piety.

We reject the concept of alaukik and embrace the laukik. For instance, the brave acts of Bhagat Singh and a mother's affection for her child are pious virtues. But in both cases, the piety is laukik or secular. There is nothing superhuman or alaukik here. At the same time, we are free to question the thoughts and actions of these people.

The supposedly true religions have two more categories. The first comprises the pious and everlasting, while 'sansar' (the common world) and 'maya' (the illusory material world) form the second. The pious, i.e. true religion, controls the business of

the material world.

Historically, religious thinking has held the most influence. Common folk toiled to earn their bread; artists created exquisite works. The men in power governed. Over and above these was dharma, hailed as the highest value. Should we accept this notion?

ANiS believes that social, moral and aesthetic values such as justice, brotherhood and duty need no support from dharma. Nor should one accept dharma's dominance over any of these values. Values exist independently. A few centuries ago, a social system without a king was unimaginable. Today, democracy is known to provide a better social life than any other system. The values that all humans, including the religious, sincerely accept from the bottom of their hearts can be considered as just and humanitarian. They can't be subordinated by a supreme religious value. You can improve human life, fight for human values, and overcome limitations through persistence and hard work, without being religious or harnessing any supernatural help.

In the face of a catastrophe, we need to stop relying on an omnipotent god and figure out our duties. No human value is mysterious. You can feel it in your heart and have a clear awareness of it. Only those who don't care for these values to be upheld will try to give them a mystic spin. The wholesale dealers of such mystified values—religion, religious institutions, leaders—are the ones who turn their backs on the struggle for human values.

There is no need to mystify human values. Even schoolchildren know what cleanliness, good food and courteous behaviour are. Human rights do not seek support from anywhere else, not even from religion, nature or science. They have only one dimension—humanity. As per Sane Guruji, true religion can have only one meaning. It's called love.

When a little child or old man wants someone to help them cross a road, it's a case of one constituent of the society needing help from another. And when a passer-by takes them to the other side of the road, they are a sensitive constituent offering the help. Traditional mindset says that the child or old man prayed to god for help and then god came to their rescue in the guise of the passer-by. We need to reject this notion because crossing a road is a human situation. It's a case of one human being

fulfilling the need of another because of their responsibility as part of society.

Despite this knowledge, there are people who ask how reformers gain the courage to keep going against all odds if there wasn't a god. When man struggles for what he thinks is beneficial for society at large, but is actually beyond his capability, he hopes that other human beings will pitch in. For thousands of years, man trusted religion to evolve values for society, but that didn't happen. ANiS believes that people must be self-reliant and focused on progress. The human race can have a bright, promising future only if all human beings depend on their own efforts. Atheists should help and support the religious and vice versa.

During its early days, religion was supposed to inject morality and law into society and shape the material life of human beings. As man's thinking evolved, new needs developed. While the planet fulfilled his material needs, he also travelled into his mind. The awareness of death and the fact that it was inescapable made him feel lonely and helpless. He feared penury and discrimination. He was overawed by the vicious play of desires in his mind. That's why the idea of elevating the mind with virtues such as kindness, forgiveness, love and compassion lured him. Man also conceived of a higher power to find relief from grief, control rebellious desires and foster virtues. He surrendered to it with total devotion.

In reality, man derives his power from within. He's his own support and doesn't need an external refuge to gain relief from his grief. To earn this power, he has to endeavour on his own without any support from anyone else. He has to embark on an inward journey and acquire 'samyaka drishti', an appropriate outlook on the world, nature, society and, indeed, himself. Such an outlook will help him develop a better, dignified relationship with these elements.

Historically, various people have sought out their own paths to mitigate grief, subjugate desires and sublimate themselves in the cause of morality. They further developed and improved upon their paths. But some religious sect or another hurriedly appropriated these paths and added rituals to the mix. Exploitative religious systems, thus, stemmed from the independent thoughts of original pathfinders. Leaders made their

religions prosperous and pompous. Instead of helping people become independent and strong, they made them superstitious and fatalistic. The masses responded to the machinations of these religious heads out of helplessness, or at times, selfish interests.

The search for truth forms the keyword for reform. Man investigated the 'truth' expounded by religion using a scientific outlook. Religion had to step out of the material world. Galileo was punished by the then pope for his investigation of the truth, but eventually the papacy accepted their mistake and publicly apologised—even if it took three and a half centuries. Soon, religions too will have to face up to their false concepts about man's 'inner world', which are based on ignorance and superstitions. This will become the basis for a new line of thought for humanity. It won't be part of any established religion, nor will that thought establish itself as a religion. The new thought will encompass all of humanity, without any restrictions of caste, race, nation or faith. It will gain nourishment from the criticism of old religions and from new comprehensions in various branches of knowledge. Man's inward journey will progress with the help of psychology, anthropology, biology and sociology. Once man's human needs are identified, fulfilling them won't be a burden but a joyful endeavour.

On one level, this new thought will offer an alternative to established religions. In the absence of such an alternative, human beings will either become increasingly superstitious or pleasure-seeking. Both these tendencies are detrimental to the quality of human life.

What name can we give to this new line of thought? There isn't a term for it, so we'll have to coin one. It isn't religion for sure. With due respect to religion and religious sentiments, the new thought goes far beyond religiosity. It is dynamic, humanitarian and ethically evolutionist. It is in line with what the Samiti thinks.

3

Faith and Superstition

Take a look at these statements:

> ‘I believe in god.’
> ‘God incarnates himself.’
> ‘God answers people’s prayers.’
> ‘God punishes the evil and protects the virtuous.’
> ‘God is omniscient and omnipotent.’
> ‘Nothing takes place in this world against god’s will.’
> ‘God makes miracles happen.’
> ‘God reveals himself in visions.’
> ‘God means good conduct.’

All these appear to be statements of faith. But when you analyse them one at a time, you’d find that some of these sentences also express superstition. So, how do we distinguish between faith and superstition? Or are they synonymous?

Let’s analyse the meaning of the word ‘faith’ through an example. When you say you have faith in your mother, it refers to your respect and gratitude for her, which is a natural and appropriate sentiment. That doesn’t mean you will just accept an irrational view she holds. The children of an orthodox parent who insists on shutting all doors and windows during an eclipse may not follow suit. Someone may want their offspring to marry strictly within their own caste, which may or may not happen, depending on the circumstances. None of these reactions indicate that a person’s love and affection for his elders has diminished in any way.

If we apply this logic to sacred texts, we’d realise that any

proposal put forth to examine one's faith in the 'word' is treated as a personal affront. Hindus are 100 per cent sure that god resides in idols, while Muslims believe in the opposite. Hindus swear by the existence of atman (an individual's soul) and how its union with paramatma (the supreme soul) relieves human beings from the cycle of birth and death. Buddhists dismiss the notion of atman. Jains insist on a dinner before sunset, while Muslims don't even sip a drop of water before moonrise during the month of Ramzan. Each religious group defends its own views and rituals as true faith and condemns other faiths as superstition. This is also the case when people laud ANiS for its campaign against the culture of buvabaji but refuse to hear a word against their own babas. This is solely because of faith, not critical examination. One person's faith may be superstition for another and vice versa. Some people may even be ready to lay down their lives to defend their faiths. All of these factors make the eradication of superstition an explosive problem.

Temporal and individualist nature of faith

Several centuries ago, a just-widowed woman would be burnt alive in her deceased husband's pyre. Her half-charred body would then be thrown into the river. In one such instance, a woman survived the atrocity and floated to the shore. Governor General Lord William Bentinck's police pulled her out and tried to revive her. But the so-called faithful groups demanded her body, arguing that saving her life this way was unacceptable, and that sati was an issue of religious faith. When Lord Bentinck promulgated a law banning sati in 1829, it led to several demonstrations in Allahabad and other places. The protestors asserted that the East India Company had no right to interfere in religious faith, which the custom of sati was part of. The law kicked in nevertheless.

Despite the enforcement, a woman in Deorala, Rajasthan, committed sati in 1987. This time, it was women-welfare bodies and other social organisations helming demonstrations, to demand that the ban on sati be made stricter. Thus, the custom of sati, which had constituted religious faith until the nineteenth century, had become a clear case of superstition by the twentieth. This is the temporal nature of superstition.

To delve into the individualist nature of superstition, let's quote an incident involving Sathya Sai Baba. We once got hold of a film that chronicled his 'miracles', and showed it all over Maharashtra. The Sathya Sai Baba Trust built a huge Mangal Karyalay (a big hall for celebrating auspicious occasions), named Kalyana Sai Mandapam, at the cost of Rs 4 crore. It was obvious that a chief minister or someone similar would be invited for its inauguration. But for a Mangal Karyalay of this scale, no less than the prime minister would do. As a result, the then minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao, attended the occasion. Shankarrao Chavan, the home minister at the time, was also present—so was Lok Sabha speaker Shivraj Patil and the chief ministers of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka.

All dignitaries, including Rao, can be seen in the film seated on ordinary chairs. Sathya Sai Baba, on the contrary, takes a lofty, decorated and pompous throne. Following a sermon, he honours a host of builders with medals. A trusted disciple hands over a few mementos to Baba, who then presents them to the awardees. But Baba calls each of them back and waves a closed fist in the air. To everyone's surprise, a gold chain materialises in his palm. He then adorns the conferee's neck with that piece of jewellery.

Because of the prime minister's presence, the event was bound to get ample publicity. But what escaped the Baba's mind was that the huge number of television cameras around were set up not only in the front of the stage but also at the rear. They captured the disciple handing a chain to Baba from under the tray carrying the gifts.

I screened the film at a number of press conferences in Maharashtra and sent it to both Chavan and Patil. The chief of ANiS's buvabaji section even went to see Chavan during the latter's Solapur visit. But Chavan asked him to leave his circuit house, saying, 'This is a question of my faith. I will neither criticise it nor allow anyone else to do so.' This example underlines the individualist nature of faith.

Thus, faith, belief and superstition are three different things.

Let's observe another set of statements:

> 'I have faith in my wristwatch and that is why it shows me the correct time.'

‘I have faith in the electric bulb at home and so it showers our room with light.’
‘I have faith in my pen, because of which it inks letters on paper.’

In these cases, faith is similar to belief.

Suppose an individual making these statements prostrates in reverence or subservience to these things. What happens if they don’t? Will it cause a defect in the mechanism of the watch? Will the power supply conk off and render the bulb useless? Will the pen run out of ink? These events are a function of causality, not lack of faith. So, where one is aware of causality, made clear by scientific outlook, it is belief. Faith isn’t the appropriate term here. Even stating that 2x2 = 4 or that polio immunisation has benefits are examples of belief. Belief comes with the element of causality, while superstition doesn’t. Of course, this is only a very basic definition of superstition. We can expound on it further, using an example.

There is a practice where women suspected of theft or promiscuity are made to dip their hands in boiling oil and take out a coin placed in it. If a woman is able to remove the coin with her hand unscathed, she is declared innocent and let go. This is sheer brutality, and in complete contradiction with the principle of causality. There is no causal connection whatsoever between the woman’s alleged misdeeds and the injury she sustains due to contact with hot oil. Thus, superstition becomes all the more destructive because of the absence of causality. It leads to exploitation.

Given the everyday use of science and technology, scientific outlook too should have reached people—to some extent at least. If that’s the case, why don’t superstitions vanish, and the resulting exploitation stop? That doesn’t happen because superstition is a very complex process. Criticism of it is disallowed.

A woman is supposed to be impure when she is menstruating. But science has shown that menstruation is a regular phenomenon during a very specific phase of a woman’s life and automatically disappears in its natural course. How does the question of branding a woman impure arise here?

Vinoba Bhave once called human beings a gutter of urine and faeces. All of us need to evacuate our bowels and bladders inescapably. But no man deems himself impious because of it. He is as pure as he was before—if anything, he is more clean after washing his hands and feet after answering nature's call. Why then should a woman, who menstruates for three or four days a month, for a certain number of years, be branded as impious? This injustice is rooted in a male-dominated system and vested interests in religion, which suppresses women and thinks of them as unholy beings for the responsibility that nature has bestowed on them. This delusion of a woman being impious during her menses is especially explosive. The principal of a women's college once publicly dismissed her 'impiety' during her periods, asking why it should stop her from visiting a temple. Thereupon, she had to face threats and intimidation from various quarters. Newspaper editorials carried pieces of angry outbursts and viciously criticised her statement. This is how explosive superstition can get.

It is interesting to see how ancient scriptures use the word 'faith'. For 'belief', three criteria decide its validity. The first is direct evidence. As per Adi Shankaracharya, even if several intellectuals, on the basis of several tomes, tell us that 'fire is cool', we cannot believe it. That's because we burn ourselves when we come in contact with its flames. This direct knowledge is valid and is the basis of trust.

The second criterion is inference. Say, you're in a thick forest and there is no visible path. You have no clue which way leads to a human settlement. You suddenly notice a dozen streams of smoke go up in the evening sky, although no human beings, dwellings or vessels are visible. But you know from prior experience that people in forests use wood for cooking. You can thus logically conclude that the place from where the smoke is emanating must be inhabited by human beings.

One's word too is a criterion for the validity of belief—like how students imbibe what their teachers say. However, to be trusted, the speaker of these words ought to know the truth and even practise it. If we follow a scientific outlook, we'd realise that a teacher's word might not be accurate or final. So, verifying the knowledge obtained through a teacher in the light of new evidence doesn't mean you're insulting or being rude to them.

(As mentioned before, this kind of verification is neither recognised nor permitted in religion at all.)

Gautam Buddha repeatedly used the word 'faith' in his expositions. But he also laid out a number of steps that lead to faith. These steps involve criticism, which means they are based on a causal connection and are, therefore, in consonance with the process of faith.

Religion is a fundamental, organised faith. Humans examined faiths and became *Homo sapiens* —wise people. In the process, religious faith too came under the scanner. Scientific outlook evolved through the verification of truth. Religious 'faith' has often been forced on to the backfoot when science has proved or disproved a belief.

Many people have a deep faith in god. Yet nobody keeps their child away from polio vaccines and leaves them at the mercy of 'divine protection'. Thus, in one sense, wherever there is direct establishment of a causal connection, faith has to withdraw from that field. Also, when the science of sociology progresses, faith-based concepts of social structures come under examination. Traditionally, a king was supposed to have a divine spark within him. But in a democracy, a person of royal lineage too has to face the electorate and accept their verdict—be it a 'Yes' or 'No'. In case an aristocrat commits a crime, they are punished under the law like any normal citizen. Their nobility does not let them circumvent the law. (Until recently, the royal family of Nepal remained outside the purview of law, but not anymore.)

Even the value system of a society depends on faith. When faiths are examined, the reliability of traditional values also tends to be questioned. The faith-based value system then gives way to a new humanitarian version. Banning women from education was a religious value until the recent past, but a strong movement in favour of women's empowerment kicked it out.

The protective armour of superstition

Superstition is fossilised ignorance, as strong as Karna's kavach and kundal—his breastplate and earrings. Emotions and sentiments form a protective armour around ignorance. It is different in case of faith, where such an armour protects

knowledge instead of ignorance.

As long as Karna wore the kavach and kundal, he was invincible. But he had to give them away to Kunti, which turned out to be a very painful process. Likewise, the kavach and kundal of both faith and superstition imbue one with a feeling of protection and invincibility. But the problem arises when one is unwilling to examine whether these kavach and kundal are based on knowledge or ignorance because doing that requires one to remove this armour and assess oneself. The mere thought makes one insecure and vulnerable.

Even today, inter-caste marriages are doggedly despised and opposed because of the perceived superiority of one caste over another. When someone from a supposedly high caste weds someone from what is seen as a less pious, inferior caste, they are said to bring dishonour to their families. But consider this indisputable scientific fact here: there are only four blood groups on Earth, and one's genome patterns happen to be 99.97 per cent identical with that of all other humans. Science has gifted us this knowledge. If you evaluate the sentiment that bestows superiority or inferiority on a person during birth, you'd realise that it is undoubtedly a superstition. Such an assessment, though, requires one to remove the relevant kavach and kundal, which is easier said than done. That is why, even when the feeling of belonging to a caste is accepted to be plain superstition at a certain intellectual level, the caste system still persists in practice.

Eradication of superstition: the initial steps

Some superstitions do disappear, through a natural psychological and social process. These are rooted in ignorance, are inhuman or life-threatening, opposed by social reformers, or difficult to observe as the pace of life becomes faster. We still need to thoroughly understand the idea of faith, though.

When we consider the sort of superstitions discussed above, we see through them the progress there has been in the eradication of superstition. The custom of devadasi, for example, is an inhuman one. The first seminar to oppose it happened way back in 1975 at Nipani. From then on, programmes encouraging the removal of jata (matted lock of hair) from women's heads

were held one after another at several places. The jata that formed on a girl's scalp was treated as a sign that she was destined to become a devadasi. But here's the truth. In poor families with no sanitation facilities, young girls had hair that was unwashed, uncombed and never oiled. Naturally, the tresses would become matted. The solution for this is taking good care of girls and their hair. However, instead of cleaning and combing the hair to remove the matted portion, it was retained and proudly exhibited as an invitation by the deity, called Renuka Mata or Yellamma. The girl was withdrawn from school, if at all she was attending any. Turmeric powder and vermilion was regularly applied on the matted lock, and a small shrine with an idol of the deity in it placed on the girl's head. She was then sent from one home to another to beg for alms. On Fridays, she was supposed to be 'possessed' by the deity. In due course, she would be taken to a Yellama temple, married to a god and relegated to the status of a devadasi, i.e. a female servant of god. Because she was already 'married', she couldn't wed a mortal being. Ultimately, this servant of god would become a slave to men's lust. She would fall prey to either village scamps or a red-light area. Her dreams of a happy life would thus be shattered.

In 1934, the British promulgated a law banning this horrendous custom. A movement began against it in what is now Maharashtra and Karnataka. A commission was appointed to investigate into the problem, and a few progressive steps were taken. Interestingly, while the bill to ban black magic faced opposition, on the grounds that it was anti-Hindu, the law banning the devadasi system—the Bombay Devadasi Protection Act, 1934—was readily passed in the legislative assembly. This shows that when a superstition is inhuman, it can be eradicated with conscious efforts. If not uprooted completely, it can at least be greatly reduced.

Some superstitions that develop out of ignorance dissolve in the light of scientific knowledge. A few decades ago, smallpox was seen as god's wrath. But thanks to immunisation, the disease was completely eradicated and so was the irrational belief associated with it.

Then there are superstitions that vanish because of the changing social life. In today's hustle and bustle, it is impossible to stick to the injunction of untouchability, especially while

eating out at a restaurant. You just cannot find out who ate out of a plate before it's handed to you. And so, rotibandi (prohibition on sharing food with lower castes) too goes out of the door. Also, the practice of confining a menstruating woman to her house isn't feasible in the contemporary age. Those surviving on daily wages cannot stop working for four days a month. Neither the woman nor her employer can afford it.

Eradication of superstition: not with anger but compassion

Famed litterateur Vijay Tendulkar once said, 'Man is superstitious because it is his need.' Man's emotions and thoughts together form his personality. His conduct isn't guided by thought alone; his emotions too express themselves in the process. Man's behaviour thus isn't entirely rational. This is a human limitation.

Say, you are required to visit a cemetery on a new moon night all by yourself. Since childhood, the notion of the existence of ghosts in such a place is imprinted on your mind, and so you're scared. What are you going to do now?

You were once told that chanting 'Ram Ram' drives evil spirits away, so you keep saying that while tiptoeing into the cemetery. This conduct is undoubtedly superstitious. But, given the circumstances, it is excusable, even if inappropriate.

The Samiti has always insisted that in the work of the eradication of superstition, one needs to be compassionate rather than angry, and friendly instead of scornful. The reasons behind a person's superstitions are varied, so our attempts to eradicate these superstitions too are multipronged.

Even a sturdy car, with all its parts equally strong and well assembled, requires shock absorbers. Our roads are full of bumps and potholes, which can cause jolts and shocks to the vehicle and the people riding in it. The automobile manufacturer is expected to ensure protection to the vehicle, and more importantly, those inside it.

This analogy applies to a superstitious individual as well. If a person is strong and healthy, it means they have a good heredity and their intellect and emotions balance appropriately. However, life is also rife with disappointments, grief and hopelessness. To protect themselves from a breakdown, people too need shock

absorbers, which they find in superstitious beliefs. These beliefs are traditionally recognised and promoted by their family and society, right from childhood. So, they don't find anything wrong with them.

In the cemetery example, the 'Ram Ram' chant is a shock absorber meant to avoid a breakdown from a fear of ghosts. Here again, one has to distinguish between seeking support from superstition and getting caught in its clutches. Using a superstition in a dire situation, such as this, may be for a while understandable. But if a person entering their boss's cabin or crossing the road chants 'Ram Ram' while doing so, they are surely trapped in the quagmire of superstition.

Gravity of superstition

People may argue that they have the right to be superstitious. They may use rings for good luck, chant a deity's name, tie a charmed cord around their fist, or have their guru's photos inscribed on their lockets. They say these are their personal affairs—why should others criticise their behaviour?

At the outset, the argument sounds quite logical. Only a deep understanding can reveal the flaws in it. That the Samiti opposes superstition because it is exploitative is one aspect of it. But what's more important is that, in today's times, an individual needs to provide evidence in every matter. If you own a house, it has to be registered at the office of the municipal corporation. If you hold any land, you have to possess a certificate to that effect. If you drive a vehicle, it has to be registered and you are required to carry a copy of the licence along. If you visit another country, you need to show the passport of the nation you belong to. These are all genuine proofs. But can man prove that he is a human being?

The only evidence that man can produce to this effect is the intellect he has earned through his own efforts. Man's intellect isn't a divine gift. He was an animal for lakhs of years. In the course of evolution, he acquired a thumb and separate fingers. Using his two hands, he started working on the things around him, which also helped develop his brain. He acquired a voice box, which was capable of many more kinds of vibrations than any other animal. He used it to create language, which he

channelled for communication. He toiled and applied his tools to get better results. He chiselled his intellect and became the only animal to possess a developed brain. During our evolution, which lasted through millions of years, thousands of generations of human beings persevered for the accumulation of knowledge, bit by bit. That stash of learning is available to us now. When an individual easily falls prey to superstitions and calls it their 'personal problem', they are ignoring this precious heritage left to us by our forefathers. Isn't this a very grave issue?

Why can't educated people get rid of their superstitions?

Isn't it surprising that when science has reached its zenith and is lighting up the entire world, there are people who cover their eyes and fumble about blindly? And that these people include scientists? It is perplexing to see scientists remain superstitious. But then the saying goes, 'People adopt the world of science but not the scientific outlook.' Let's try to find out why this is so.

The Renaissance agitated Europe for a few centuries. It was a multipronged approach. Scientific discoveries openly challenged religious tenets. Criticism of religion began with the rebellion by the Protestant sect. Communication with other countries increased with the spread of capitalism. A new attitude of global thinking, self-assessment and willingness to change developed. Philosophers offered different worldviews.

No such thing happened in India. There were no scientific discoveries. Nobody questioned the caste system. Religious injunctions prohibiting crossing the ocean disrupted communication with the world beyond. Because of the lack of trade, one could only raise capital through moneylenders, brokers and feudal lords. Science in the country developed only as technology to suit the convenience of the British Raj. The Indian psyche was never so thoroughly shaped and stirred as it happened in Europe. People belonging to a country known for Charvaka, the Lokayata tradition and Buddha completely forgot how to ask questions until centuries later. We finally learned the principles of science and causal connections but only used them to create technology. Many of us remain miles from a liberating, scientific outlook. So, we fail to notice the incongruity of finding the 'auspicious' time to open a shop or perform a Satyanarayana

puja.

Any individual, as well as a society, has an unconscious mind. Traditions, vows, observances, talismans, charms, pujas, prayers, rites and religious rituals are all part of the individual and social unconscious psychology. This unconscious inner mind is immune to criticism. An educated person learns what the scientific outlook is, but that knowledge alone cannot strike at the superstitions deeply rooted in their inner, unconscious mind. To eradicate superstitions, they have to be brought out of the unconscious parts to engagement at the level of the conscious mind.

But people are never ready to let this happen. Only life-threatening superstitions end up being criticised. Even then, there may be no action to rid society of them. And when superstitions don't seem dangerous, one is hardly prepared to put them under the scanner. As superstition is also part of the social psyche, individuals receive support from society in such belief, and face no need to give it up.

A release from the fear of the unknown and a hope for the fulfilment of unrealised desires are two important factors that support superstition. The development of a scientific outlook is not enough to do away with these. Starting from one's childhood, it needs to be impressed on the mind that practising superstitions does not abolish fear and that no divine power helps get things that are inaccessible. Modern science tells us that these impressions cannot be made by cajoling a person or attempting to cram it into their head. Only a direct experience of all these things can boost the interconnections among the neurons of the brain and strengthen the impressions. Reiterating 'cleanliness is godliness' won't inculcate habits of cleanliness. It is only when you keep exposing your children to clean environments and the advantages of it that you help them form a lifelong habit of observing cleanliness.

The same goes for the eradication of superstition. Children should be given opportunities to examine, first hand, these so-called miracles and instances of fortune telling and black magic, among others. Unfortunately, this kind of education never happens. It requires a lot of courage, which many of our teachers lack. Any suggestion to examine superstition is taken as an attack on one's faith and faces questions such as 'Has your science

unravelled everything?' The result: an educated scientist or other professional is not immune to attacks by the defenders of superstition. These individuals aren't injected with the vaccine of action-oriented, independent and fearless critical thinking. They are taught scientific outlook as if it were a precise formula. So, their superstitions remain intact, despite their education, offering them easy ways to fulfil their desires and escape from the fear of the unseen.

Thus, these individuals lead dual lives. They practise a scientific outlook in their professions. But they also spend on rosaries, charms and amulets to 'ensure prosperity' and 'overcome obstacles'. They don't think that their behaviour is contradictory to the Advaita philosophy, which believes in 'one soul' pervading not only human beings but the entire animal kingdom and nature. Yet, we have maintained a highly discriminatory hierarchy of as many as 6,000 castes. If you ask these people how they approve of the Advaita philosophy and caste system at the same time, they call Advaita a spiritual reality and caste system a material reality, with both being right in their own places. A superstitious scientist too uses this same tricky argument to defend their behaviour.

Man should be acting at the behest of his thoughts, but more often, he is goaded by emotions. Thoughtful actions are unhurried and considered. Because they are based on reason, they are convincing, resolute and seldom likely to create tension. On the other hand, when a person acts under the influence of their emotions, their scientific outlook is pushed out of sight. Such actions are potentially explosive.

Justice Ranade defines faith as 'reasoning passionately triggered into action'. So, faith is related to passion, i.e. predominance of emotion. Faith is an active force that possesses the power to cause an explosion. Here, the question arises whether an explosive action is due to faith or superstition. The answer depends on whether the energy released by the explosion raises ethical discernment or lowers it.

The annual pilgrimage to Pandharpur is a good example. We are often asked whether it is out of faith or superstition. The implicit thought behind this question is 'Why don't you oppose it if it's superstition or support it if it is faith?'. If we analyse this question based on Justice Ranade's definition of faith, it is clear

that this pilgrimage is an overt articulation of passionate devotion (towards the deity Vithoba). So, crores of people proceed on the path to Pandharpur on foot. The first criterion of faith is thus fulfilled.

The second criterion is triggering action. The pilgrims of Pandharpur face numerous physical adversities—heavy rains, muddy roads, biting cold winds, inadequate food and facilities—with calm. But none of these hinder the determined action of walking to meet the deity.

The third criterion is reasoning—discretion of good and bad. The pilgrimage isn't aimed at getting any benefits or rewards. Nobody has any vows to be fulfilled, nor do the pilgrims mind if they are unable to get a glimpse of Vithoba's idol because of the crowds. They feel satisfied even if they are only able to see the top of the temple's dome from a distance.

These are undoubtedly the signs of a rational mind that conceives of god. However, in order to reach such rationality, there's a huge distance beyond the path of this pilgrimage that remains to be covered. This decides whether the pilgrimage to Pandharpur is faith or superstition.

At present, a few lakh people make that journey every year. They have to halt for a night in some village or another with a population of only a few thousand people. Can you imagine what happens after several lakhs of people defecate in the morning in these handful of tiny villages? While scientific and technological measures can mitigate the outcome, they are shockingly inadequate even today. This is the first test of faith's ability to reason.

The next is abstention. Once a varkari, or pilgrim, wears a garland, the sect believes that the person's addiction is bound to vanish. And more often than not, that individual quits drinking (or other vices). But the reality is that the state administration's policy openly encourages alcoholism. The revenue earned from the sale of liquor was Rs 250 crore in 1992–93, which increased to Rs 4,200 crores in 2008–09. The increase in alcoholism, seemingly advantageous to the affluent class, is a conspiracy by the government against the country's development, rectitude and poverty-alleviation goals. How determinedly, extensively and effectively the Varkari Sampraday opposes this detrimental policy provides another criterion to decide whether the vari is an

act of faith.

The most important criterion, however, is whether the Varkari Sampraday practises the sentiment of equality. In the middle ages, rampant discrimination beset society. It was reflected in a person's attire, food and ways of worship—so much so that a person's looks revealed the caste and even the sub-caste they belonged to. The Varkari Sampraday was established under such circumstances. Any person could be a varkari. They only had to wear a garland of tulsi (with beads made from the stems of the basil plant, which is considered holy) and a round mark of sandalwood paste on the forehead. Besides, they had to chant 'Vitthal, Vitthal', partake of the prasad of puffed rice and sweets, enjoy these with other varkaris and walk the path to Pandharpur along with them. The sect treats all its members equally, irrespective of their caste or religion. Its philosophy says, 'The entire world is of Vaishnavas (devotees of Vishnu). Vaishnava is the only religion. Discrimination is illusory and foul.'

Sadly, this philosophy of universal brotherhood remains confined to the sandy banks of the Chandrabhaga and lasts only during the vari. It hasn't shaken the discriminatory hierarchy of castes that has remained entrenched in every town and village. People belonging to the lower castes are forced to stay outside the boundaries of the village, and are still disallowed inside the village. 'One village, one source of water' remains only a slogan. Members of the higher castes own the village's wells and don't permit people from the lower castes to fetch water from there. Inter-caste marriages are abhorred even today. Mahatma Phule and Dr Ambedkar were born a few centuries after the establishment of the Varkari Sampraday. Yet we know what these great men had to go through because of their birth into lower castes. The Varkari Sampraday didn't do anything about it.

The ability to elevate value judgement is the most important criterion of faith. The Varkari Sampraday has a long way to go before it can pass this criterion of faith on equality. Only this aspect can prove the authenticity of its faith.

Faith: fear, lure, criticism, value judgement

This part calls for a little more explanation on faith.

Fear and lure are two powerful drives that lead a person

astray. Faith should enable one to overcome them. Many people readily declare, 'My faith in my religion is unshakeable.' But when offered a crore rupees or threatened at gunpoint to convert, won't one fall prey to the lure or fear? Or will they? Everyone who makes such claims should answer this question honestly.

Faith does not refuse to be examined on the basis of truth. Dr Ambedkar once explained it with a very apt simile. He asked people what a person should do if they find a shining yellow piece of a metal. The obvious answer is that it should be taken to a goldsmith, who will test it by fire. The finder of the piece won't object to this test. If it isn't gold, they don't need it. But if it is, the piece will gain more lustre after it is heated in the fire. So, when an insignificant piece of metal has to pass a test to be confirmed as gold, shouldn't faith face a similar test of truth? Especially when one makes important decisions in life based on faith?

Faith shouldn't shy away from the test of truth. On the contrary, testing faith will only help it grow. Mahatma Gandhi was once conducting a wedding ceremony, where the bride was the daughter of one of his disciples named Shri Gora. It was an inter-caste alliance. Gora asked Gandhiji, 'Bapu, you are performing this ceremony by "inviting god to witness". But my daughters and I are atheists—so is the bridegroom. We do not need god to witness the marriage.' Gandhiji married the couple with 'truth' as the witness. Gandhiji's faith, which had started from the premise that 'god is truth' (i.e. god exists), progressed to culminate in 'truth is god'.

Like truth, non-violence is another fundamental test of faith. Violence contradicts the genius of man. In fact, it stands against the very notion and purpose of being human. Those who, in the name of their own faith, endorse or promote heinous acts against other faiths are, in reality, championing superstition.

A new fad of performing huge yajnyas to establish world peace has captured the imagination of the educated, affluent upper class. Because Christ had 'performed miracles', it is necessary to prove that a pious individual has done the same during their lifetime or after death in order to grant them sainthood. There is no extant portrait of Muhammad, but if someone were to get hold of such a thing, they would not find it

easy to publish or reproduce it. The causal connection in each of these examples can be easily examined to determine their veracity. But even a slight hint of any such assessment will raise a hue and cry. Such violent opposition is a disgrace to faith.

Value discernment is the touchstone for deciding whether something is faith or superstition. Lord Rama is an issue of faith for crores of people. People were instigated on the issue of his birthplace. In the name of faith, a Muslim place of worship standing there was demolished and an idol of Ram Lalla was installed in its place. All these zealots need to be asked one question. Which values practised by Rama made him the subject of faith? Two of these oft-mentioned values are that he always told the truth and stayed loyal to his only wife, Sita. To have faith in Lord Rama is to follow these two virtues.

But everybody admits that today's society is practically devoid of truthfulness. And what about the other value—swearing fidelity to one wife forever? A survey conducted in Maharashtra during the peak of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement revealed that as many as six lakh women had been deserted by their husbands, most of whom had remarried. This is totally contrary to what Lord Rama preached. But those who declared their faith in Lord Rama and jumped into the movement preferred to keep mum on the survey's findings. Clearly, much as they talked about their faith in Lord Rama, these people had no intention of practising the values he had cherished through his life. They were not working to embed the values of their cherished god in society, they were using him to hoard votes.

A person should not become so obsessed with their own faith that they make it impossible for others to follow theirs. Else, it isn't faith but something else that is being promoted. There are innumerable people in this country who think that their religion —Hinduism or Islam—is supreme. They believe their faith alone is ethical. The Constitution has granted them the right to hold this view. But there could be two other people who treat all human beings equally, irrespective of their caste, religion, gender, race, etc. Now, suppose a Jain woman and a Buddhist man with such a disposition decide to marry, their parents and fellow religionists may violently oppose this marriage. Even their lives could be at risk in some cases. Here, it isn't faith but plain superstition.

People tend to decide on issues or with regard to their actions emotionally, disregarding causality. If they were to examine the causal connection of their decision, it will not appear to be rational. Say, a few hoodlums in a village trouble the people there, and one thin, lean man resolves to fight them. His belief is that truth will prevail with god's grace, injustice will lose and justice will triumph in the end. This belief seems doubtful to be borne out in reality. Besides, those ruffians are likely to have influenced the police, media, politicians and everyone powerful. Considering the causal connection of all these factors, the man's struggle can only prove to be self-destructive. Yet he perseveres on account of his faith. Thus, his ethical decision to act against injustice isn't centred on a causal connection but emotional chemistry. Even though the process involves a risk to his life, he is able to overcome all fears and continue his endeavour. Whether he triumphs or not is another matter. The point is that, to take an ethical stand and act accordingly in an adverse situation, this individual draws inspiration and support from his faith that 'god sides with justice and truth will prevail in the end'.

One more example. Driving away the British from India and liberating the country from their rule was a matter of faith for many revolutionaries. The thought that 'we ought to free our motherland from British slavery' touched their hearts. Thus, the first criterion of faith was fulfilled through the intensity of feelings. The next step was conversion of these intense feelings into action. History reveals that these insurgents undauntedly bore the atrocities meted out by the British. The lure of a cushy life did not dissuade them from their faith. The third and most important criterion was the rationale behind their aim and actions to drive away the British. What these rebels strove for was to eliminate every white officer in the country and thus annihilate the British. They then planned to hand over an independent India to those who had been in power before the arrival of the British. Was this stand feasible or even desirable?

On the other hand, the position taken by the leaders of the freedom movement showed their elevated discretion regarding values. They believed, 'Our fight is against British imperialism, not the white man who is our friend. The progress of the common man of this country isn't possible under colonial rule, so

we want our independence. We aren't interested in bringing back the old imperial rule or caste system.' This (rational) thought can be called faith because many of the common people participating in the freedom movement did not understand its causal connection with the British defeat. Their decision to fight was emotional and was an outcome of faith in their leaders. But looking back, it can be called a rationally ethical decision based on faith.

There is a point that ought to be explicitly stated. Faith can create values, and religion assists this process. But the Samiti is of the opinion that values ought to be born through rational thinking and not religion. Rationalism is the value-based expression of a scientific outlook. It is neither god's voice nor any religious command, but the sum and substance resulting from ratiocination. Human beings risk their lives to defend the values derived from rational thinking, of which a number of examples can be sighted.

The discussion in this chapter aims to discriminate between faith-based actions and superstitious actions. Whether it is called faith or loyalty, or even vigilant faith, it has to be examined using three criteria:

1. Whether the faith is examined on the basis of truth with respect to other faiths, and whether the believer is non-violent and tolerant of other faiths.
2. Whether the faith helps a person overcome fear and lure and goads them to act.
3. Whether the faith of the person elevates their humanity or reduces it.

An insistence on such an examination is a sure-shot way to progress in human life and culture. That is the reason the ANiS movement persistently debates topics of faith and superstition.

4

My Understanding of Spirituality

I was once asked to speak on the topic 'My science: my spirituality'. The subject's novelty helped it receive an equal amount of appreciation from ANiS activists and the public. But it was a continuation of the thought process in an earlier discourse of mine, 'We are the real religious ones', which was held at a few places in Maharashtra. This session, especially the title, was a bit tricky. How could a non-religious person declare that they are truly religious without contradicting themselves? I went ahead anyway.

My choice of wording was based on the knowledge that religious sentiments were being commercialised, merchandised, perverted and politicised. Those involved in these practices have nothing to do with religiousness or its ethical aspect. To them, religion means rituals, clerical dominance and upholding mental slavery. In my case, I 'religiously' live by my rational ethics. In this sense alone, I am religious. I have acquired the religion of my parents; I haven't given it up or converted to any other. Thus, I have remained a Hindu by birth. Automatically, I have also inherited the teachings of the saints and social reformers from my birth religion, and I accept the noble meaning of religiousness defined by these greats. Hinduism is so flexible that it even embraces a person like me, who refutes the existence of god and the validity of the Vedas.

My ideological adversaries hastily call me non-religious (rather than irreligious or anti-religion). They wish to possess the sole right to explain what religion is and express their own opinions about it. They also want to decide what action needs to be taken concerning matters religious. Instead of leaving the

powerful weapon of religion entirely in their hands, I have devised a strategy to enter their territory of religious thinking and proclaim as loudly as possible, 'I am the real religious one, while you are all pseudo religious.'

These days, the so-called spiritual authorities, with titles such as 'Bapu', 'Dada' and 'Paramapoojya', are doing a roaring business. Their following runs into lakhs. There is a common explanation for this phenomenon. That the propaganda of religious awakening and spirituality offers support to harassed human beings and provides them with an illusion of relief from their griefs. There is, of course, some truth to this. But despite my personal choice of atheism, I believe that an understanding of the sociology of religion is a precondition for criticising it using a scientific outlook. Both sociology and religion should adopt a more mature, mellowed and tolerant scientific stance.

Everyone knows the common stand on scientific outlook, and there aren't two opinions about it. Scientific outlook means that truth can be discovered through the step-by-step process of 'observation to experiment'. Such an outlook is always humble. It never claims to have uncovered any final truth but considers upholding the truth more important. This truth is universal and objective. It develops maturity and understanding, which help find feasible solutions to the problems in our society. Scientific outlook, therefore, shouldn't remain confined to a laboratory but must be used in all matters of life.

Adhyatma (the science of the spirit) means reflecting on the soul. Those who refute the existence of the soul find Adhyatma to be an empty, senseless discussion. When spiritualists say, 'Where science ends, Adhyatma begins,' opposers reply, 'Unlike science, Adhyatma has never, in all its existence since ancient times, found any solution to man's problems of hunger, poverty and discrimination. Thus, Adhyatma has proved to be a total failure while science has rushed to mankind's rescue.' We will keep this debate aside for now.

How to approach Adhyatma

Opinions on the nature of the Adhyatma principle vary. Religions and sects differ in their expositions on it. Yet these explanations seem to have a broad similarity.

Adhyatma has two approaches:

The first is Adhyatma as metaphysical thinking, which is focused on the world beyond rather than this one. Life on Earth is less important in this discussion. The search, instead, is for answers to numerous questions. What is the original nature of the soul? Where does it exist before and after one's lifetime? Does it migrate through several yonis (classes of created existence as numerous as 8.4 million)? Is the soul immortal? Who created the universe? What is their purpose? Who operates it? How is this entity related to the soul? What is the meaning of talking to oneself? Who enables the eyes to see?

There is a difference between religion and spirituality. Unlike its physical counterpart, the spiritual principle is sentient and vital. For various reasons, it is rooted in ignorance, gets sullied and bound (by chains of relationships and emotions), and is prone to unhappiness. When this vital principle realises who or what it is, it is freed from all bonds and finds eternal bliss. The fundamental principles of the universe are spirituality and 'ishwar', the supreme god (or 'paramatma', the supreme soul). The essence of an individual is spiritual and is called soul, or 'atman'. When atman unites with ishwar, the individual reaches the state of eternal bliss: satchidananda. The vital principle, which is usually engulfed in sorrow, is then enlightened by the knowledge of its own self—of who it is—and relieved of all fetters to reach the state of permanent joy.

Religion shows human beings how to achieve this union. It recommends sacred texts and divine vision to obtain redeeming knowledge of the self. Logically speaking, the spiritual principle or soul, being vital and sentient, can think and remember. It can acquire knowledge. As it is sensitive, it can feel happy or sad. Only the vital spiritual principle can have sentiments such as compassion, love, charity and morality.

As per the concept of Adhyatma, every individual possesses a soul. God is not only another soul but also the supreme one. He is the most virtuous of all. When the individual soul meets the supreme soul, the former becomes virtuous as well. The individual's inadequacies leave them and the person becomes accomplished in all respects. Hence, this is the path everyone is advised to follow in life.

This notion cannot be accepted. The study of evolution tells

us that the present universe evolved out of an abstract energy, which is the predecessor of all things existing in the entire universe. This energy is, however, inanimate. In the course of evolution, physical substances, life and vitality gradually evolved. The primordial energy cannot be called vital because scientists have proved that vitality is nothing but the living brain. It cannot exist in any other form. So, there is no basis for the belief that the fundamental principle of the universe is omniscient, sensitive, ethical, just and blissful. Also, the human being has attained an especially elevated plane of vitality only through evolution. The saying 'God made man in his own image' isn't true. Rather, it should be that man is the only animal to have reached an extraordinary stage of evolution.

There is another danger in this approach. In the everyday life of all human beings, conflicts are inevitable. Instead of facing them head-on, this version of Adhyatma advises people to run away from them by trying to bring about a union of their atman with the non-existent paramatma to create eternal bliss. This can make it hard for a person to reconcile with everyday realities. The hardships of life on one hand and the pursuit of the illusive Adhyatma on the other may lead to a disharmony in the mental faculties.

The second way is treating Adhyatma as a process of cleansing the mind. The usually prescribed disciplines of kundalini, yoga, Sudarshan Kriya, namjap (reciting a deity's name), and the like are not necessary to achieve this. Adhyatma requires training oneself to drive away lust and desires from the mind and inculcate moral virtues. It believes that there is something much more valuable to be accomplished in life than creature comforts and physical pleasures.

Most human beings think that wealth, leisure, enjoyment, honour and reputation are essentials for a good, worthy life. But a truly spiritual individual goes beyond these worldly diversions. They swear by a modest, ethical and simple life, asking and accepting nothing from others. Their actions are compassionate and oriented towards their fellow beings. Such behaviour itself is Adhyatma; the rest is empty talk. What keeps you morally aware is namasmaran (remembering god and reciting his name); if it does not, then it is only din and noise. When a so-called spiritual man amasses riches in billions, feasts on scrumptious meals,

wears expensive silk clothes, and resides in an ivory tower, seeking the company of glamorous women, the contradiction in his life is obvious. That's because Adhyatma or spirituality is related to restrained behaviour, the knowledge of what is good and bad, and the refusal to take anything that doesn't belong to one.

Adhyatma has another element. To see truth prevail and good triumph over evil is an emotional need. Adhyatma is perceived as a way of striving towards meeting it. Every religion maintains that human good is what ultimately wins. This conviction is an important factor of religious faith. In this sense, the Adhyatma or spirituality of every religion is the same.

Vinoba Bhave goes a step ahead and says, 'Politics and religion will fade away; science and spirituality will prevail.' It is necessary to properly understand this statement.

Politics is an arena where vested interests openly fight among each other at different levels—local, national and global—to capture the available resources. Science has made available the means to keep human beings reasonably happy. But the fight between politically inclined parties has deprived the masses of these supplies. Statistical data shows this too. All over the world, including in India, nations earmark a large chunk of their budgets for defence. The politics of defence consumes whatever finance is available, leaving nothing for development. Today, expenditure on defence is unavoidable—so is the politics of defence. But one can imagine a scenario in which man, who is gradually growing wiser, will eventually realise the futility of such politics. When this happens, the biggest hurdle in the utilisation of science for human benefit will be removed. The money spent on defence will then be utilised for human development and well-being.

The same scenario can be extended to religion. Dr Ram Manohar Lohia succinctly said, 'Politics is a short-term religion and religion is long-standing politics.' Every religion, like politics, has its own ethics, philosophies, rituals, clergies and also exploitation. This type of religion will wither away, as predicted by Swami Vivekananda and Vinoba Bhave. Religious concepts or conventions that are blatantly contradictory to the laws of science will drop out automatically, just as the Roman church had to concede that Galileo was right. The secondary aspects of

religion—philosophy, rituals, clergy—will also go away, and only spirituality will remain to accompany science, as proposed by Vinobaji.

A belief in the triumph of morality and supremacy of human beings forms the core of all religions. This isn't rooted in the principle of causality, but doesn't contradict it either. While truth does win at times, it is also defeated on many an occasion. In the case of the latter, a religious individual says, 'Truth shall ultimately emerge victorious by the grace of god.' This statement reveals the person's belief in god, as well as their instinctive desire to see the good win. Non-believers, on the other hand, strive to achieve the values they cherish, even if the goal is beyond their capacity. Obviously, they don't resort to god's support or religion. But they are confident that other human beings will come to their aid and help them achieve their aim. This stand, too, isn't entirely based on causality. While human beings are known to support others, there are also those who are best at placing hurdles in the path of others. In short, achieving values is as much an expression of an atheist's optimism as a religious individual's.

Practising Adhyatma

We are surrounded by a huge market peddling various means of following Adhyatma, which need not be described here. But Adhyatma can also be practised in a novel form.

Pride is spirituality's greatest enemy. To get rid of it, one must be engrossed in doing good, noble work. Staying busy helps work progress. A setback, if any, humbles one and reduces one's arrogance. A clever argument against hard work is that it can engender pride in one's achievements, and so it's best to avoid it. This attitude could not be more wrong! Abandoning work and becoming lazy do not rid one of pride; they only cause a person to fail in his duty. A farmer must sow the seeds, even if he cannot and should not expect the fruit immediately or in his lifetime. The seeds of the fruit of cultural progress that all of us are enjoying right now were sown long ago. And naturally, what we sow now will bear fruit for future generations. Not expecting the fruit of our own labour does not need any spiritual apathy towards worldly interests. It is a matter of practical common

sense.

Purification of the mind is the core aspect of spirituality. All spiritual rituals—be it awakening the kundalini, namjap or Sudarshan Kriya—are performed to achieve this goal. But getting rid of emotionally charged thoughts and expressing dignified views aren't that easy. Vinobaji's take on this topic is quite innovative. He says the vishvatma (universal soul), i.e. paramatma (supreme soul), manifests itself as virtues throughout the world. So, purifying the mind means seeking these virtues manifested in nature and fellow beings and praising and assimilating these qualities. Thus, to elevate oneself spiritually, one should appreciate the virtues of others. The exact opposite is, of course, the common mentality. We are quick to notice others' faults and ignore their positives.

Society is unhappy because it is self-centred. The community appears selfish because every person in it is so. Each one only cares about their own joy and doesn't bother if it is at the cost of others. Spiritual practice or training should, therefore, be a collective activity because efforts to create a happy society are indispensable. Instinctive humanitarianism is the true nature of spirituality, and it can be found in humanity alone.

Vision of god

The wider purpose of spirituality is to meet god. Leaving aside the mundane discussion on what god is, it is presumed that one can see god in three elements:

- Heart (mind)
- Nature
- People

Putting aside the question of whether god exists, let's try to understand what we can as rationalists on these three levels.

Overcoming lust and desires and nourishing virtuous, ethical sentiments in the mind are absolutely necessary, whether in the name of god or otherwise. Religion and Adhyatma have tried to find out, in their own ways, how the mind can be purified. Granted that these are honest efforts and deserve due respect, but they are quite inadequate. On the other hand, whether

humans can sublimate their emotions and sentiments poses a huge challenge to psychological experts. While it's agreed that emotions are the effect of external circumstances, science still has a lot of work to do in this regard.

It is unnecessary to state that such a purified life affords a vision of god. At the same time, if someone leads a life like this with the hope of seeing god, there is no reason why anyone should oppose or denounce them.

In addition, society today is in a self-destructive, anti-nature mode. Everyone is to blame—from firm believers to staunch atheists. But there are many others who strive to help people adopt a nature-friendly lifestyle. They tell us that we should eat wholesome vegetables, pulses and fruits; avoid oily, spicy, fried and sugary foods; wear simple cotton clothes; consume only natural drinks; regularly exercise without fail; use the eyes to read and watch nature instead of being glued to the TV, and other useful dos and don'ts. Now, all this is common sense with nothing spiritual in it. But we need not raise any objections if someone adopts this way of life as a spiritual practice.

Vinobaji wrote about his two cross-country padayatras (walking trips), which took him a total of twelve years. He said he had seen god in the multitudes of people he encountered during the journeys. His spirituality, he believed, would have remained incomplete without the experience. We aren't sure whether god can be perceived in such a form, but many of the figures who gather huge crowds around them in the name of spirituality are completely indifferent to human values and the struggles to uphold them. Also, the minds of their innumerable 'spiritually well-placed' devotees are stressed by the strains of their own making. Their efforts to resolve their problems are openly self-centred and not in the least spiritual. On the other hand, when a man acts with the backing of his moral force, he stretches himself to the limits of his physical capacity. His efforts then become a source of joy and fulfilment. That's because there is compassion for the exploited in his endeavours. Therefore, *those who wish to meet the supreme soul that exists in the common populace ought to be humane.*

The Adhyatma that overlooks humaneness is a false one. There is an instance I have cited in a previous chapter about the annual pilgrimage that takes place in the Hindu month of

Ashadh. For centuries, the varkaris have been reiterating 'All are Vaishnav—our religion is Vaishnav' and that discrimination is a foul practice. However, the Varkari Sampraday has failed to contain untouchability or bring back the downtrodden banished from their villages. Nor has it been successful in fostering inter-caste marriages or preventing elections from being influenced by the caste system. An atheist who stands by science is likelier to side with the populace at large and work to bring about social reforms. But the spiritualist believer doesn't seem to go beyond mere platitudes to seek god in the underprivileged. There is nothing more commendable and worthy of emulation than a spiritual individual serving the multitudes and mingling with them. But people should be able to experience the effect of this spirituality in their daily lives and not just hear an empty preaching of spirituality.

In short, one need not fear or oppose the kind of spirituality that advises people to be engrossed in good work and thus get rid of vanity; seek, praise and assimilate the virtues found in fellow beings; and strive for the collective well-being of the society. But an individual with a scientific outlook practises all this anyway. A rationalist keeps enhancing his mind and awareness, lives in accordance with nature, and insists on spreading equality in the society. In this sense, isn't a rationalist as spiritual as a spiritualist?

A lot of false propaganda is floating around about Aniruddha Bapu, who claims to be a great spiritualist. It's said he meets his devotees simultaneously in the guise of different deities. Narendra Maharaj threatens to break his opponents' hands and feet. Asaram Bapu, without batting an eyelid, once told his audience that he was a widowed woman because of the sins he had committed in his previous birth. Sathya Sai Baba performs 'miracles' but refuses to let anybody examine them. He also keeps mum about the episode where his own devotees who had attacked him were confined in a room and killed. When Nirmala Mataji's process of Kundalini Jagriti is challenged, her devotees go about beating up the demonstrators. As all of these people are accepted as spiritualists, it can only mean that society does not adequately understand what spirituality is. The lifestyle of each of these spiritualists is lavish and extravagant. Every one of them has accumulated immense riches. A few use only a tiny fraction

of this wealth for public welfare and claim a disproportionately huge credit for their 'benevolence'. They don't utter a word about reforming the social system. The common man's problems —unemployment, price rise, corruption, casteism, fundamentalism, discrimination, female foeticide, etc.—are never the topic of their sermons.

But we've also had legendary spiritualists such as Mahatma Gandhi, Gadge Maharaj and Vinobaji. Gadge Baba collected crores and kept an impeccable account of every penny. All that he possessed throughout his life was nothing more than his torn clothes, the staff he held and a piece of a broken earthen vessel for receiving alms. He roamed across Maharashtra and cleaned its grounds. He continuously attacked caste discrimination and superstition with all his strength. When Vinobaji received 42 lakh acres of land as charity, he distributed most of it. Mahatma Gandhi, a barrister, wore only a short dhoti in the chilly weather of England and met the emperor in the same attire. India achieved freedom under his leadership, yet he did not linger in the capital to celebrate the first Independence Day. Instead, he went to wipe the tears of the riot-torn people of Noakhali.

All these men believed in god. They have attained the heights of spirituality through their tireless striving for the people. They talked about god, religion and Adhyatma, but these men's spirituality was genuine and totally different from that of the so-called spiritualists of today. ANiS may not use the language of spirituality that these great men spoke in, but that doesn't stop us from appreciating the positive meaning of their spirituality, even though some may call it a convenient move.

5

Women and the Eradication of Superstition

Mental slavery is the biggest horror that emanates from superstition. The mind of a superstitious person is compromised, and for such a person, perversely, the tool of exploitation appears to be the gate to emancipation. Women are much more prone to becoming victims of such manipulation. Despite being the target of multifarious exploitations caused by superstition, women don't utter a word in protest, leave alone act against them. These practices don't seem like superstition, but like genuine beliefs that lend meaning to life. Women feel proud and blessed to follow such customs.

A woman becomes superstitious because she has to live in such an adverse, male-dominated atmosphere that she has no other way but to surrender. There is nobody to guide her to escape from this web, which adds to her helplessness. Her life is filled with grief, defeat and frustration.

The main reason for a woman's despair is the subordinate status that her family, society and religion reduce her to. Even in the twenty-first century, a girl child is unwanted—so much that we have to launch movements to educate people about the dangers of the reducing female-to-male ratio.

Our country had, at one point in time, a matriarchal social system. But today, because of the patriarchal structure, women are forced to depend on men. Marriage and the birth of a son form the entire essence and substance of a woman's life, while these are common events for a man. A woman is not only her own self but also a virgin, adult, fiancée, wife, divorcee, abandoned spouse, or widow. Each of these labels is related to a man, who is considered her 'owner' and also her god in the form

of a spouse. It is impressed on her mind that the core of her life lies in fulfilling her duty as a daughter, wife or mother—not independently but under the charge of a male. All her vows and observances are aimed at getting a great spouse and son. In case her husband dies, for whatever reason, she is held responsible for bringing that misfortune on the family and never invited to any ceremony. Because she's now 'inauspicious', she is disallowed from commencing any good work. She is also debarred from being present at her child's wedding! Even today, the Maratha community, proud of its noble ancestry and achievements in many walks of life, is totally against the remarriage of young widows.

Our Constitution provides for gender equality, which still remains confined to the page alone. What we see around us is the lack of employment opportunities for women, less pay than men for the same kind of work, and refusal to grant women the right to property, among other forms of discrimination. Also, women still do not have a reservation of 33 per cent in state assemblies, leave alone 50 per cent reservation in the Lok Sabha. Such treatment creates a strange contradiction in society. The merit lists of school and college examinations feature the names of numerous women, and yet it is women not men who are deserted (the men just merrily get remarried). Similarly, mental illnesses and dowry deaths plague women. Again, despite a woman being in charge of the ruling party, women politicians don't get even 5 per cent of the seats in the parliament, legislative assemblies, or upper house.

To find out why a large number of women become superstitious, we need to understand this wholesale subordination of their gender. This means that women's issues and the eradication of superstition aren't mutually exclusive concerns. The status of women in religion, culture, economy and politics—the systems that affect social life—impacts every other aspect of society and beliefs.

Superstition and women's health

Malnutrition is a universal problem among women. While poverty has a big role to play in this, it is also true that a woman tends to eat after feeding everybody in the family. Thus, she gets

only the leftovers or, sometimes, stale food. Besides, she has to observe a series of fasts, regardless of her fitness levels or medical history. All these factors contribute to ill health in Indian women. Despite being in charge of the kitchen, the lack of adequate education and exposure keeps her unaware of what constitutes a square meal. She is unable to include all the necessary nutritious ingredients in her cooking, even if it may be economically feasible for her family.

Another important issue is menstruation. A girl's physical growth is completed about four to five years from menarche. As menses usually begins at the age of thirteen or fourteen, a girl is fully grown at around eighteen, which is the minimum legal age for her marriage. But in many rural areas, girls are wed off much earlier and they become pregnant at too young an age. The lack of proper and sufficient food, coupled with the girl's underdeveloped womb, results in rickety, underweight babies. Thirty per cent of India's newborns weigh less than 2.5 kg. The incidence of infant mortality in India is even higher than in many poorer nations. The number of women who die during childbirth, too, is huge. The responsibilities of a marital life thrust upon a young girl with an immature body and mind exhaust her completely. Mild or even severe mental illness stems from such conditions.

Our intention while describing the neglect of women's health is not to pass judgement on our country's health programmes. The point is that many a woman, due to the aforementioned commissions and omissions, has to confine herself within the four walls of her house and lead a rotten life without raising her head. And this is called a high-born, refined life of noble heritage. Nobody is allowed to utter a word against the present system. One can imagine how vicious the opposition gets when one tries to escape from this system.

Women and religion

All religions, without any exception, are significant contributors to this contemptuous treatment meted out to women. Judaism commands that a wife should be abandoned if she lets a flatbread burn while roasting it. According to Christian scriptures, Eve (female) was created after Adam (male) from his rib and for him,

and that it was Eve who enticed Adam to taste the forbidden fruit of knowledge. Thus, a woman is held responsible for the original sin and the consequent human history of grief. The Digambar Jains deny women the right to attain emancipation. Gautam Buddha allowed women into his religion only at the insistence of his favourite disciple, Anand. But he was unhappy because, he said 'admitting women will shorten the life of my religion to 500 years, which otherwise would have survived for (at least) a millennium'. In Islam, a man can utter 'talaq' thrice, oust his wife from her prosperous household and throw her onto the streets. While Indian law has entitled women to alimony, Islamic diktat denies it to them. In Islam, a marriage is a contract between two parties, which is terminated after talaq. Muslim spokesmen argue that there is, therefore, no reason to compensate for the deserted woman's loss. In one stroke, they have refused five crore women their right to alimony.

The Hindus have in any case been denying their women the right to education for a long time. 'A woman isn't entitled to freedom,' says the Manusmriti, which controlled the social life of Hindus for ages. 'She has to always obey her husband, even if he is a gambler, addict or debaucher.' As per the great saint Tulsidas, 'a fool, an animal, a Shudra and a woman ought to be beaten from time to time'.

All these myths are ploys perpetuated by male-dominated religions. Such religiosity has been, for century after another, entrenched so deeply in every mind and family that it is tough to change the age-old psyche. No wonder it provides a fertile ground for superstition to take root.

Very often, even an earning woman is not allowed to take the most trivial of decisions, whether concerning her family or herself. Furthermore, the lack of medical facilities, as well as extreme ignorance, pushes women into the quagmire of superstition. Repeated fasting, inadequate intake of food and improper eating habits lead to physical and mental weakness. To combat such ailments, more vows, pujas and observances are performed. At times, the frequent illness is traced to some sort of black magic, and a witch doctor is approached to cure it, which causes a huge drain on time, money and energy. The physical and mental stress caused by pregnancy too could result in mental illness, which is interpreted as possession by a deity or a ghost.

When a woman sees other mothers pass away during childbirth or comes across news of babies dying, she and her family resort to all sorts of chanting, charms, amulets and other devices for protection. Childlessness or having only daughters becomes a matter of dishonour, and superstitious means are undertaken to wipe out the blemish. The insistence that they should bear offspring, particularly male, pushes women even further towards superstition. In short, the weak physical foundation of women's health gives rise to superstition and nourishes it.

A majority of the women in our country live under constant and severe mental stress. The causes could be financial anxieties, children's problems, harassment by in-laws, familial conflicts, lack of respect, conjugal dissatisfaction, or anything else. The result is a split personality. The woman may become reticent, silent or motionless or may start huffing and puffing in the middle of her puja (the phenomenon known as bhanamati). Neither she nor the people around her are likely to be aware of the actual reasons for her strange behaviour. It is then interpreted as a case of possession by a deity, and the woman is placed on a pedestal. If her voice or facial expression changes and she begins muttering, she is thought to be possessed by a ghost. She is then taken to an exorcist, who uses cruel, inhuman methods to 'cure' her. At times, a woman is unable to withstand the stress of pregnancy and childbirth, and exhibits symptoms such as hysteria, palpitations, shivering and a feeling of somebody sitting on her chest, all of which are considered the handiwork of an evil spirit instead of a psychological issue.

Customs, traditions and observances

In 1987, a woman performed sati at Deorala, a town in Rajasthan. The episode raised a hue and cry all over the country. But the most horrifying part was the multitudes of people who had journeyed to the site, loudly proclaiming 'Hail Sati Mata', despite the ban on this horrendous practice. For these masses, a woman giving away her life along with her spouse's corpse was a matter of pride and much more important than her fundamental dignity as a human being. This is a burning example of the mental slavery created by superstition.

The devadasi and murali (a woman dedicated to the god

Khandoba) systems are an affront to women's dignity. These are rare now, but still in existence.

The custom of dakin also exists in several Adivasi districts. In the case of a mishap—a child falling sick, a hut burning down, a buffalo not milking—people rush to the local bhagat, or sorcerer, who describes the woman possibly responsible for the problem. The Adivasis then bring a woman who matches the bhagat's description, and the bhagat verifies whether that woman is the real culprit or not using his own methods. If she is, he declares her as a dakin. It then becomes impossible for the woman to live in that village. She cannot get her children married. At times, the woman is killed. There are ten such Adivasi districts in Maharashtra alone. Even the educated lot in these areas believe that some women are dakin. It is not surprising that the suspected individuals are invariably women.

The efforts of our social reformers have paved the way for women's education. Women have also escaped from inhuman customs such as child marriage and shaving their heads when widowed. Many can now sport a hairdo of their choice. Yet they continue to be bound by traditions, customs and observances. Educated women, too, haven't developed an enquiring mind that can question the propriety of senseless rituals. Does the Hartalika fast ensure a good husband? Don't men feel the need to pray for a good spouse? Does the worship of a banyan tree really bless a man with longevity? Why doesn't a man feel that his spouse should lead a long life? Why are there no rites stipulated for men to ensure the well-being of their respective spouses? These questions do not normally occur to women. In case they do, women are not supposed to ask them openly.

Even a little deliberation on these customs will reveal the inherent contradiction in them. Let's study two examples. Many married Hindu women observe the Mangalagauri Vrat, where they worship a female deity for the longevity of their respective spouses. They express the wish to die before their husbands so that they remain saubhagyavati all their lives and avoid widowhood. These women also pray to a banyan tree, each wishing for the same man in the next seven lifetimes.

Now, here's the catch. Tradition demands that the man be older than his wife in every birth. For this to happen, logically speaking, he must die earlier than his spouse in this lifetime. Yet

women blindly follow these customs that their parents and in-laws expect them to, without questioning them, and unwittingly encourage superstition. Swatantryaveer Savarkar, who is still supposedly the emperor of Hindu hearts, criticised this nonsensical attitude. 'All observances, from Hartalika to Vat Purnima, are nothing but the worship of untruth,' he said.

Some women, unsatisfied with the plethora of traditional observances that already exist, throw more into the mix—the Santoshi Mata vrat, for example. Even educated women compete with each other while observing these customs. TV serials are further responsible for adding occasions such as Karva Chauth into our already chock-a-block almanac. But women don't seem to give any thought to the utility of these customs or the inconvenience caused by them. They argue that our ancestors weren't fools to follow these traditions, nor were their mothers and grandmothers, who insisted on their continuance. At the same time, these obedient women do several things that their mothers and grandmothers didn't and would never have wanted their daughters to. The list includes getting expensive haircuts, sporting heavy make-up, driving cars, studying their favourite courses and working jobs (even previously frowned-upon ones such as modelling).

A popular argument goes that rituals and customs refine our culture and help children learn more about it. The only thing youngsters imbibe from these is the subordination of women, as every tradition is meant to ensure the well-being of the men and children in the family. None of these observances has any mention of a woman's health or long life.

There is an unspecified, unexpressed fear that not observing rites may bring calamities on one's family. These anxious people do not notice that those few who do not bother with traditional observances don't seem to have anything bad befall them. Some admit that all this is humbug but follow them anyway to stay in the good books of their parents and in-laws. Are these women sincerely trying to not disobey their elders? Don't they anyway do umpteen other things that contradict the wishes of their parents and in-laws? They are not even prepared to compromise with their elders on the choice of food or style of cooking. Then, why are they so particular about not displeasing their loved ones as far as these superstitions are concerned?

Another strange argument is that these observances bring people closer to nature, acquaint them with medicinal plants and conserve the environment. But why are only women chosen to bestow all these benefits and, of course, responsibilities? Again, why is there no mention of the medicinal values of observances in mythological stories?

The biggest worry is that women who admit to being aware of the futility of these senseless observances are hesitant to discourage their daughters and daughters-in-law from following them. Instead, they give them the freedom to 'decide for themselves'. This attitude is due to the fear caused by mental slavery.

Women's empowerment movements directly tackle several problems. But when it comes to theism and religiosity, they don't tackle the slow poison called discrimination injected into women's minds through rites, rituals and observances. The need is to engender a new sense of self-awareness among women to uproot the evil.

Male domination

Blame our country's discriminatory and male-dominated social system for the absence of self-awareness among thousands of women here. Over the years, women have been denied any opportunity to watch or study culture, forget developing it. Their awareness, perceptions, sense of appreciation and outlook have been shaped by the most unscientific scriptures and Puranic literature. They have been socialised to believe that cooking and raising children are the core functions of their existence. Women received the right to education very late in history, and even today, it is restricted to middle- and upper-class women. The subjects taught to women excluded the sciences. Consequently, scores of women lack the abilities of logical thinking, questioning traditions and rejecting them, expressing and accepting novel ideas, etc.

The new dimensions of predicament

In India, education arrived first and modernity next. But the latter was accompanied by capitalism, which ended up merchandising various traditions.

This development proved profitable to the capitalists in two ways. Evil and exploitative customs took root as cultural traditions, which are notorious for producing mental slavery. Nobody is allowed to critique, change or reject these traditions. They have an exalted status and are channelled for commercial ends. For example, if the custom of wearing a black saree on Sankranti becomes recognised as a tradition, lakhs of wardrobes will be stocked with such sarees, and it is only the textile industry that prospers on account of it. Also, the news of this trend or revival will receive publicity in the media, which too promotes commercialisation by building pressure on the market.

Two phenomena are simultaneously at play in society. A woman is bound by the merchandisation of traditions. At the same time, her irritation and resentment with life compel her to rebel. In such situations, eradicating superstition depends on the more viable alternative—succumbing to tradition or rising against prevailing circumstances—rather than any logical argument. Breaking this vicious circle is a test for progressive parties, organisations and movements such as ANiS. When a woman begins changing her mindset and actions, the process induces a shift in the system and its values. A woman may observe fasts and penances for the sake of her spouse, who is supposed to be a form of god for her. But when the man not only neglects her, even beats her up, the experience will necessarily change her. Changing the value system is a long-drawn and complex process, and activists must approach it with patience.

Earlier, it wasn't easy for women to hide their periods, but now they can. There was a time, though, when menstruating women were kept away from ceremonies and shrines. Today, they can easily participate in auspicious events and also visit temples. Yet, they don't let others know about their menses for fear of exclusion. Considering a woman craves social company, like every normal human being, she prefers to keep the secret instead of courageously attacking the tradition and taking credit for doing so. Also, we now have women-only tour groups that embark on trips and excursions to pilgrimage sites. Their desire to enjoy the company of fellow travellers is more powerful than their devotion to any god. Perhaps this is why society disapproves of such groups even today.

The emancipation of women from superstition is a

multidimensional process. While protesting against superstition, a woman has to be both courageous and sensitive. She grows up under the religious, cultural and traditional influences of her parents' home, and post-marriage, she has to embrace her in-laws' customs. This requires playing a dual role. She is required to be polite and respectful towards her elders, keep them happy and maintain affection and peace in the family. At the same time, she is an individual with her own independent thinking process, and with the desire to put her own thoughts into practice. So life becomes a tightrope walk for her. To break out of the old framework and add new content to enrich the cultural space outside her home is another challenge before her. In addition, at every step, the woman has to face insecurity and financial difficulties. All these factors push her towards some superstition or another, again and again, with false promises of greater security. Sometimes, she offers pujas to different deities, observes fasts, or resorts to other petty observances. At least some women must be convincing themselves that this kind of support is illogical but harmless. Facing the harsh reality of life is nothing short of walking through fire for many women. The Samiti, therefore, endeavours to provide women with positions of priority and prestige in the movement.

6

Social Reformers of Maharashtra and the Eradication of Superstition

The history of social reform in Maharashtra is around 150 years old. It began with Gopal Hari Deshmukh (also known as Lokahitawadi—'the defender of people's interests'), born in 1823, and continued with Prabodhankar Thackeray, who passed away in 1973. Other luminaries include Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, Gopal Ganesh Agarkar, Maharshi Vitthal Ramji Shinde, Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj, Gadge Maharaj, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar and Swatantryaveer Savarkar. Their thoughts about their fellow citizens' conditions, plus education, agriculture, untouchability, etc., were unconventional and displayed sound rationalism, a scientific outlook and a sense of humanism.

The inculcation of a scientific outlook and the principle of reforms and humanism are some of the most important duties featured in the Indian Constitution. But our reformers had expressed these ideas up to a century earlier. They deserve praise and gratitude for their far-sighted perceptiveness.

We have made some advancements in the fields of women's education, the universalisation of studies, discontinuation of untouchability, and social justice. Yet, our progress in the development of a scientific outlook and its application has been slow. In fact, we seem to be regressing. That's why it is essential we study the legacy of our great reformers.

The eradication of superstition in India makes for a unique piece of work. Its opposers have vested interests in maintaining superstition, and the dismantling of this evil could lead to losses for them, particularly financial. This is understandable. But the naysaying parties also include multitudes of people who don't

understand that they actually stand to gain from the abolishment of superstition. If we experience such resistance today, one can only imagine the difficulties social reformers must have faced over a hundred years back.

Even in those difficult circumstances, Agarkar sharply reprimanded the defenders of Sanatan religion more than a century ago. 'There's a clash going on between knowledge, science and thoughtfulness on one side, and thoughtlessness on the other,' he said. 'This is also the case between foresight and blind faith, progress and obstinacy. People like you are bound to feel ashamed, defeated and frustrated. If you wake up in time, you will avoid all this humiliation and leave this world peacefully . . . Better give up your pig-headed inflexibility, and try to adjust to a changing society.' These words are as pertinent today as they were back then.

Jyotirao had explicitly pointed out that human beings are different from other animals because of the power to think rationally. Indeed, the tremendous progress of the human species has been made possible by our intellect. While extolling this extraordinary ability, Jyotiba felt anguished that our fellow denizens had failed to do justice to their faculties of reasoning.

Our intellect possesses the capacity to liberate us from mental slavery. Yet, history has shown that people have blindly believed a number of things without questioning them and are now trapped in such slavery.

'God gave man knowledge and singled him out from other animals,' Lokahitawadi said. 'As man can think, speak and discern what is good or bad, he should be able to sift the grain from the chaff. When he does that, all old, useless traditions and customs fade away and people realise their worthlessness.' Lokahitawadi believed that 'knowledge is might'.

The teachings of all these social reformers reveal their trust in the human intellect as an effective instrument to achieve overall good.

Discussing superstition

Our social reformers lashed out at superstitions more severely than ANiS does today. 'People were conditioned to believe that the gods wrote Sanskrit tomes—that humans were incapable of

penning them,' Lokahitawadi said. 'Ignorance and vices spread among the Brahmins, as the Brahmin tag was attached to all those who were born to Brahmin parents. International travel stopped completely. The idea of Kalyug captured everyone's imagination. People started blaming their destinies (for their misfortunes). Innovation came to a standstill. Anything could be sold in the name of religion. Superstitions ruled everything. The mythical stories in Puranic literature rested mainly on the forces of destiny and the supremacy of Providence, due to which human beings lost confidence in their abilities. These stories also supported numerous evil customs, thus increasing ignorance and lethargy.

'Industriousness petered out,' Lokahitawadi said. 'People wasted their precious time on puja patha, japajapya, snanasamdhya, yajnya, anushthan—all sorts of religious rites and rituals. This resulted in a loss of industry and trade. Only feeding the Brahmins was on the rise. The stagnation created a lack of basic knowledge of how to produce even common objects of utility, such as paper, thread, glass, needles, scissors, etc. Texts such as *Garuda Purana* and *Nirnaya Sindhu* came to be written, prescribing a set of rituals to keep people engaged throughout the year to ensure steady incomes for the Brahmins. All these factors enfeebled and enervated society.'

Lokahitawadi further said that no Sanskrit pandit had the ability to modify or improve any machine. The use of the grinding stone from Vyasa's time and the plough from the Pandavas' era continued for centuries without any innovation.

The Sanskrit language has semantics but no physics. The knowledge of its grammar and figures of speech is useless and unproductive. Society back then was still ignorant about other countries, their realms and sovereigns, military might, trade, inventions, laws and more. Our great, erudite sages authored the shastras, but we have made little progress from them in the last three millennia. We restrict our learning to only what our ancestors have written, without adding any new ideas to those texts or transcending them. The concepts of luck, astrology, demons, saints and mendicants gained tremendous importance, and all the wrong notions took root. These include the control of human life by the nine planets, the distress caused by them, presenting gifts to Brahmins as a way to end our woes, appeasing

the gods through vows, and fatalism, among others.

Lokahitawadi ruthlessly criticised blind faith in sadhus and babas. 'The babas' practices are such that one feels ashamed to even talk about those things,' he said. 'Some babas are debauchers, a few are thieves, while others cheat. All they think about is how to swindle and fleece gullible people. They aren't holy beings; they are frauds . . . A sadhu preoccupied with bathing and ablutions is like a stone. He is convinced that the world is perishable and his religion useless. The term "sadhu" refers to a man who is lazy, useless, ignorant and stupid. Some reiterate their deity's name from morning until evening, while others fast for fifteen days a month. They read only a couple of books throughout their lives but worship a heap of stones daily for hours. They admire and respect other great babas too. Of what use are these sadhus and babas to society?'

In his book *Agamaprakash* , Lokahitawadi described a society where these sadhus and babas operate successfully. 'You can find these babas sitting before their "holy" fires at several places,' he writes. 'The mantriks, with stripes of red vermilion on their foreheads, eagerly wait to trap gullible people in their webs. Avadhoots (men detached from this world), ascetics and yogis showing off their rites are ready to distribute holy ash to their devotees. Miracle-mongers, magicians and sorcerers confront us everywhere. Sadhus boasting about curing diseases and granting the birth of a son, and so on, are omnipresent. Similarly, we come across Ramdasis, who claim to pass on their guru's wisdom to us and show us the path to emancipation. All these people are born to defraud us. We should, therefore, be cautious and protect ourselves from them.'

According to Agarkar, eradicating superstition means finding causality in whatever happens around us. 'The notion that hearing an owl's cry, having a cat crossing one's path, witnessing the fall of a meteorite or sighting a halo around the moon is a bad omen isn't rational,' he said. 'Nor is the seeing of a snake in one's dream, or spotting a cow with its calf, or a bharadwaj bird a good sign. Establishing false causal relations in this manner stems from ignorance. Similarly, previous and upcoming births, a soul without a body, Kailash, heaven, Vaikuntha, Patala (the netherworld), Yama (the god of death), and other such concepts are pure imagination, with no basis in reality.'

Jyotiba explained causality using several examples. ‘If reciting god’s name and following other observances bring rain, then why do the Aryans die of thirst?’ he said. ‘Why are many Brahmin women childless? Are their religious rituals and performances futile? How did the Peshwas’ regime come to an end, despite having sought auspicious days to go to war? How did the white sahibs, who never bothered to find an opportune occasion to fight their battles, win the war?’

Jyotiba further pointed to the trend of matching horoscopes before weddings. ‘Yet, many women are widowed early, while many white women who wed without consulting almanacs lead a long, happy marital life. Also, the victory of an army in battle depends on whether its morale, weaponry and strength are superior to those of its adversary, and not on the position of the planets in the sky,’ he said. He showed that astrology is devoid of the principle of causality. To top it all, the custom of child marriage prevailed during his time. As child mortality was higher back then, many girls lost their spouses at a really young age, resulting in a large population of widows. The reason wasn’t a mismatch of horoscopes but child marriage and the absence of healthcare. Jyotiba threw light on this causality too.

In a discussion on ‘Why astrology isn’t a science’, ANiS’s members raised the issue of determining the time of birth. No astrologer has been able to refute the activists’ arguments. ANiS’s points matched those made by Jyotiba 150 years ago. In his book *Shetkaryacha Asud* (*A Farmer’s Whip*), he wrote about how the concept of babas and buvas developed.

‘A number of illiterate Brahmins are unable to earn their livelihood with the help of the Panchang (Hindu almanac),’ he said. ‘So, they turn one of their own fair-skinned vagrants into a buva, put wooden sandals on his feet, hang a lute from his neck and make a Shudra hold a large umbrella over his head. Fellow Brahmins, along with beating drums, accompany him in a procession from one lane to another, shouting “Jai Jai Ram” and begging for alms from ignorant farmers. A dignified way of begging, indeed!

‘Similarly, a number of Bhat (priestly) Brahmins at a temple pick up a good-looking guy from their group and give him a lute and chipalya (a pair of clapping sticks). The rest of them dance like eunuchs behind him, singing “Radhe Krishna”. They detect

rich devotees and entice them to part with their money. After collecting a huge amount this way, they enjoy a life of leisure and fun.

'Moreover, many Bhat Brahmins, who are incapable of studying the Vedas or other scriptures, choose a half-mad marijuana addict from among them and make him the Maharaj of Bagalkot. The entire lot visits local villages and spreads the word that their swami is capable of mind reading even from long distances. They add that he has the key to the fulfilment of one's deepest wishes. With these honeyed lies, they take ignorant farmers to meet the swami and swindle them.'

Jyotiba was acutely aware of the menace of buvabaji. Only mischievous elements that seek fun and pleasure could find this business convenient. Buvabaji is invariably accompanied by addiction, debauchery and a waste of monetary resources.

Analysis of religious rites and ceremonies

Religion has a long history and various aspects. It has been ruling human life for ages. So, examining religion is an important step in the eradication of superstition.

Our social reformers understood this need well. They knew that education wouldn't be enough to uproot superstition. All superstitious concepts are supported by religion—directly or otherwise—and are based on religious scriptures and rituals. These, along with the idea of god, were all devised by men of a particular class to secure their own vested interests. So, superstitions won't disappear unless this foundation is attacked. The reformers, therefore, tried to criticise and reinvent religion.

Jyotiba was the first to advocate this stand, which is now recognised as the sociology of religion. He was of the firm opinion that every religious scripture was born in a specific period of history. So, the 'truths' propagated by those texts couldn't be timeless. Nor could they be free of their authors' prejudices or interests. Jyotiba, hence, suggested the examination of all provisos and riders stipulated in the scriptures using logic, reason and equity. He believed that the huge number of holy books in itself was the root cause of superstition.

Even Krishnaji Keluskar admitted that Jyotiba's take was unique. 'If you don't want any meddling by the purohits in the

performance of rituals, you will have to prove that those scriptures that have granted recognition to the purohits are wrong,' Keluskar once told Jyotiba. 'They won't back off otherwise. It is a necessary step to bring about a revolution in religion.' To this, Jyotiba replied, 'This is a job for strong and sturdy scientists. Until such sturdy scientists are born, we will continue whipping the Bhats and Pandyas who keep encouraging these traditions.'

Phule aspired for the moral emancipation of all Hindus—from the untouchables to even the Brahmins. His anger was a moral stand: towards Brahminical hierarchy and order, not towards individuals who happen to be Brahmin or a particular caste. He was a genuine seeker of truth. The religion that he conceived of was based on truth, but more than that, it was a universal one. It didn't claim to have discovered the universal truth or boast about preaching it to others. His quest was a moral journey, and it was also his mission. That is why he disapproved of everything connected with religious rituals—propitiation, devotion, offerings, vows, rosaries, penance, etc. He opposed the worship of idols. He believed that man should remember the creator in its pristine form. He stressed that the creator should not be given a human or any other physical embodiment. For him, the revelation of the creator was impossible for any man, so to crave to see god or a claim to have seen god was either plain foolishness or a bluff. He totally rejected the concept of god incarnating itself. ('To imagine that god has to become a human being to accomplish a mission contradicts god's omnipotence.') So, those who bragged about being an avatar of one god or another were all, in Jyotiba's opinion, nothing but frauds.

Jyotiba recognised that religious myths have been ruling the minds of our people for centuries. He knew that those myths artfully endorsed exploitation through moral arguments and opposed every systemic change. He successfully carried out the mission of busting these myths. One of these was truly bizarre—of Brahmins emerging from Brahma's mouth and Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras from his arms, thighs and feet respectively. 'When nature has bestowed the responsibility of procreation on women, why should Brahma appropriate it for himself?' Jyotiba asked. 'Pregnancy, foetal development, delivery and nursing are processes connected with human birth. How can the four parts of

Brahma's body carry out any of these? Again, if the woman, because of the activity in her reproductive organs, becomes inauspicious for four days a month, does Brahma with four such body parts become unholy for sixteen days?'

Agarkar, too, expressed severe displeasure at the illogical superstitions in Hinduism. 'The idea that killing a goat and feasting on its meat pleases god, who in return emancipates us and answers our vows, is the height of foolishness in our religion,' he said. 'If the animal that is sacrificed in the yajnya doesn't feel pain and attains moksha, why not replace it with a relative?'

'What sort of god do you have that takes the life of a goat?' asked Gadge Maharaj once. 'Is that god of yours, who created this world, so greedy and corrupt? You kill and eat one (creature) from god's house and expect god to be good to you? You will never be happy.'

'People other than Brahmins are made to believe that their well-being is in doing whatever the Brahmin priest tells them to do and they just nod their heads in compliance like stupid bullocks,' said Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj. 'The need now is to provide them with real knowledge because some shrewd men wiped out the original good elements from the Vedas and injected a lot of rubbish into the Smritis and Puranas. They concocted several stories encouraging immoral behaviour, so that they and their kith and kin could lead a profligate life. We should be ashamed of calling such writings our religious books. Hence, we shouldn't go by what these Brahmins tell us. Instead, we must practise true religion. Rather than seeking god in people, we have made an imaginary hierarchy of high and low classes and constructed religious scriptures while treating our own brethren like lowly beasts. If we recite the Bhagavad Gita in several sessions over seven days, sing devotional songs, arrange a series of sermons and kirtans, make a hell of a noise beating cymbals, walk to holy places barefoot, and prostrate time and again before idols, but continue treating our Dalit friends like unwanted animals, will god be pleased? No, he certainly won't be. On the contrary, he will punish us.'

Savarkar attacked the concepts of the supersensual and Adhyatma. 'The nature and rules of the spiritual and otherworldly truth, as we are told by various spiritual people,

not only differ from one another but also mostly contradict each other. How can such revealed knowledge be deemed as true?' he asked. He added that religious literature should be tested using direct evidence, observation, experience and experimentation; only whatever clears these steps should find acceptance. 'Let us close those tomes of the bygone age—the Shrutis, Smritis and Puranas,' he said. 'Let's preserve them as books of historical importance in our libraries with due respect to them. Once we do this, let's turn to the page of the "age of science". The old tomes will then have the permission to only tell us what happened yesterday. Science that rests on direct experience and experimentation will be the authority on what is appropriate today.' Savarkar, thus, quite bluntly described the limitations of religious scriptures.

When an individual, society or religious text is considered everlasting and infallible, indubitable and the ultimate evidence, it points to the stagnation of religion and that society. No society can grow when the dimensions are set by one person or scripture. So, if such a person or scripture dates back to 2,000 years ago, then the society following it even today remains backward by two millennia. It is immaterial whether that holy book is theistic and revealed by a 'god', such as the Vedas, Avesta, Bible, Koran and Guru Granth Sahib, or whether the revered individual was atheistic or agnostic like the Buddha or Mahavir.

Savarkar also attacked the superstition prevailing in Islam and Christianity. He said:

> It is in your own interest that you give up all your troublemaking conduct that has plagued society with beastly prejudices emanating from fanatical religion. It is not for obliging the Hindus but because it is a blot on your humanness.
>
> The orthodoxy uses weapons such as 'Don't hurt our religious sentiments', 'Stop misguiding the faithful', 'Our culture ought to be preserved' and 'We must respect our revered insignia' as its last resort. When you side with a certain individual, some other person's sentiments are bound to be hurt. Even Lokmanya Tilak had to hurt the religious sentiments of orthodox people.

> One should not misguide the faithful, yet it is necessary to guide them away from their misconceptions. Conservation of culture does not mean protecting misdeeds. The cow is a source of milk for the Hindu nation, not the insignia of reverence and respect.
>
> The problem here isn't insignificant. It is an all-encompassing national attitude. It is choosing between believing the Word and using direct perception, between the ancient and the modern, between unshakable religious faith and interrogative experimental science. We shouldn't mind if a couple of cows are killed. But we must never allow anyone to destroy the intellect of an entire nation.

Gadge Maharaj would criticise religion in conversations with his audience. Through his sermons, he'd convince people of the futility of idol worship and pilgrimages, especially those undertaken with borrowed money.

'Don't you buy god?' he'd say. 'Or do you get the idol for free by sitting in the temple? One who does not understand that god cannot be purchased is not a human being. Can your god bathe and tie his dhoti? Can he shoo away a dog that steals the offerings in front of him? Can he at least illuminate the small space of the temple? When the lamp extinguishes, you say, "Light it. We want to see god." Now, tell me, who shows god to you?'

'The lamp,' people would reply.

'Who is greater in this case—the lamp or god?' Gadge Maharaj would ask. 'Now see, there is no god in the temple. He is found all over the world. Tell me who helps a man when he is in difficulty? It's man who helps man, not god. So, have sympathy for the poor and serve humanity. Our saints told us that god resides in people. They were fine men, these saints. We should listen to them, serve them and also serve people, for god is in human beings.'

Dr Ambedkar taught us how to combine the criticism of religion with the study of social science and anthropology and proposed the idea of an atheistic religion. When he distinguished between the two concepts Dharma and Dhamma, what he really tried to do was to convince people that there could be a religion

without god. ‘Most European theologians equated theistic religion with religion. They couldn’t conceive of an atheistic religion,’ he said.

‘In the theistic form of religion, the relationship between man and god is central while that among humans is secondary or incidental,’ he said. ‘In Dhamma (atheistic religion), the good-mannered, friendly and loving relationship among humans is at the centre. Dhamma has no place for god, Brahma or the other world, or these are secondary at most.

‘Unlike India, the god-centred religion of Europe strives to protect the interests of the “haves” of a class-based society instead of birth-determined castes. It does not propose the theories of rebirth and Karma Siddhanta (the theory of sins and merits and their effect on the next birth). The Indian god, on the other hand, incarnates himself to protect the Varna-Jati system. To maintain this birth-based structure, religious scriptures created the Brahmin Varna and the theories of Jatikarma (the duties stipulated for different castes) and Punarjanma (rebirth). To ensure a firm belief in these theories among the Shudras and women, despite their exploitation, the authors of these texts invented god as the driving force. Hence, the exploited groups do not trace the cause of their misery to the material interests of the Brahmin Varna and the caste system. Instead, they blame it on the karma of their past births. So, Krishna says, “I am the god of gods”, Christ declares, “I am god’s son”, and Muhammad calls himself “the prophet of god”. Buddha alone adopted the role of a guide, and that’s why morality replaced god in Buddhism.’

Reform of religion

Whenever any custom, tradition, rite, ritual or superstition is attacked, it is considered an attack on the religion itself and the critics are branded as anti-Hindus who are indifferent to people’s emotions. Lokahitawadi, Justice Ranade and Mahatma Phule showed a way out of this predicament. They proposed the idea of reforming religion by doing away with idol worship, rituals and the concept of a caste-based hierarchy. Their goal was a lofty, noble religion.

According to Lokahitawadi, ancient authors didn’t write separately on everyday conduct and religion, so religion and

everyday affairs weren't differentiated from each other. Yet, he felt, people should distinguish between the mundane religion of daily conduct and the noble religion.

Truth, compassion and the universal right to education are related to the ethics of religion, which is the real noble religion. But in practice, this part of religion is forsaken and its vulgar counterpart embraced. Religion as it exists right now is sustained by fleecing people. You can atone for your sins and wrongdoings and please god only by availing the services of a Brahmin. But a truly noble religion insists on compassion, non-violence and a clear conscience. Lokahitawadi wished to propound a humanitarian religion that prioritised dignity, the pursuit of knowledge, and the abandonment of worthless rituals and uninformed, ignorant and pretentious conduct in the name of religion. That is why he promoted the movement of religious reform. He hoped that reforming religion would automatically wipe out superstition.

Agarkar vehemently opposed the teachings of obsolete religion and wrote in his periodical *Sudharak* (*The Reformer*) about the divergences and discrepancies in Hinduism. 'Some Hindus have the right to learn all four Vedas, some two, some only one and a vast majority isn't allowed to read any of them,' he said. 'Yet, all of them are called Hindus. Still, the different castes are prohibited from dining together and inter-caste marriages are shunned. The Vedanta (the theological part of the Vedas) is woven into religion. It is full of concepts such as Ishwar (almighty god), Maya (the illusory world), Dvait–Advait (duality and non-duality of being), Purush–Prakriti (the active/spiritual and the passive/material cause of the world), Punarjanma (rebirth), Mukti (salvation) and Sayujya Mukti (absorption into Brahma's essence). All these are disputable and contradictory to each other. How can we dispose of these contradictions? Which sect and which thought should a teacher of religion choose for their students?'

Agarkar believed that those who want to teach religion should think of this problem first. No sensible person would raise any objections to teaching a religion that propagates ethical principles derived from the collective experience of the entire humanity over the years, and proven to be faultless and beneficial. But those principles that still remain disputable

should not be imbibed by people of any religion or country. Agarkar suggested a step-by-step process for reforming religion—the concept of religion, enhanced religion, monotheism and agnosticism.

Maharshi Vitthal Ramji Shinde had a different take on religious reforms. 'Religion, so far, has been deliberately excluded from the so-called purely social reform,' he wrote. 'Traditional social reformers such as Agarkar were ready to build their work on the principles of utility, reasoning and humanitarianism but never on the foundation of religion. It is regrettable that social reformers display such a non-religious tendency. The belief that social reform and practising the basic principles of religion cannot be linked is as meaningless as the claim that social and political reforms cannot go hand in hand. All movements involving sentiments are spiritual in nature. From wherever you may start, you finally return to the same origin—spirituality.'

It must be noted that the spirituality envisaged by Maharshi Shinde is a more developed form of ethical humanism. He believed that religion too evolves like all other things. The monotheistic religion he propagated does not recognise incarnation of god or idol worship. It maintains that all human beings are children of the same god and insists on unity and equality. Thus, his monotheistic religion, without any belief in superstition, was rational.

Maharshi Shinde was a doer in the field of religious reform. He taught people to rise against the cruel custom of murali, which is similar to the devadasi system. He wrote an article in 1907 and informed the government about this immoral practice observed in many temples of western Maharashtra. He adopted a Dalit girl who had been given away as a murali, raised her like his own daughter and educated her until she became a teacher. He organised a conference in 1911 to initiate efforts for a ban on the murali custom. He founded an institution for this work and left no stone unturned, even though his life was threatened on several occasions.

Maharshi Shinde also exhorted everyone to oppose the obscenities during Holi celebrations. In his time, people used to smear their bodies with ash and dung, get drunk, and utter foul, filthy abuses, all in the name of religion. Maharshi Shinde

approached the director of the department of schools, and through his help, involved schoolteachers from local villages in his movement. Soon, all schools began organising constructive programmes, such as sports, lectures and debates, to celebrate Holi.

The connection between the eradication of superstition and comprehensive reform

ANiS believes that the eradication of superstition needs radical changes in society as a whole. Social revolution and a transformation in the thought process prepare the necessary background for a political–economic overhaul. This is the principle of the ANiS movement and the awakening that is brought about regarding religious practices. 'Make the slave aware of his slavery so that he rises in revolt,' Dr Ambedkar said. This statement makes the connection between changing mindsets and comprehensive reform. ANiS's work to create the foundation for psychological change in society, and the actual transformation that takes place, further acts as a material foundation to the Samiti's efforts.

Capitalism, the caste system and male dominance are the mainstays of exploitation in India. Religion and the excessive influence that priests have on the populace increase the impact of exploitation. The prevalence of sorcery and other magical practices maintains a ritualistic psyche in society. They have hindered the rational appraisal of religion.

Our reformers found the entrenched social slavery, as a result of casteism, more vexatious than the political one under British rule. So, they made a vigorous, determined attack on the former kind of slavery, of which eradication of superstition was one aspect. They wrote copiously and unequivocally about how to decide what is good or bad in religion, use one's own intellect and critically analyse religion to prevent the individual and social losses caused by superstition.

Jyotiba vehemently attacked the theory of 'jaganmithyavad', also known as 'mayavad'. This philosophy believes that the physical world is an illusion, and looks down upon the life in it. 'At the root of this crop of mayavad are the selfish motives of the shrewd Arya-Bhatts (the Aryans and priests). They planted in the

minds of the Shudras a disgust for this virtuous Creator-made world and all the affairs in it, so that the Shudras lose interest in everything mundane and leave it for the Arya-Bhatts to relish,' he said, elaborating his thoughts on comprehensive reform. In Jyotiba's opinion, nobody should be fooled by this mayavad. Instead, everyone should try to make their life as fruitful and interesting as possible, he felt. 'Each individual here in this universe should be able to lead a contented existence, free of thirst, hunger, illness and fear. The Creator has devised this world for all human beings to savour. So, we should enjoy it sensibly and altruistically.'

In our country, comprehensive reform is closely related to how we deal with the caste system, especially untouchability, which is undoubtedly an exploitative practice. It emanates from faulty perceptions and superstition and is supported by religion. People of a particular caste, who thought they are sprishya (worthy of being touched), bestowed untouchability on the members of some other castes. Thus, the concept has evolved from the higher castes, and so, it has to be uprooted from the minds of these people.

Abolishing untouchability in this manner was part of Maharshi Shinde's mission, along with removing the feeling of inferiority— created due to centuries of excommunication by the upper castes—from the minds of the downtrodden. He also wanted to educate them and make them self-sufficient. Shahu Maharaj asserted that caste discrimination and untouchability, which hinge completely on superstition, are humanity's enemies. 'The selfish priestly class taking advantage of the ignorant and uneducated populace has created a discord in the social psyche because untouchability is not only advantageous to the upper classes but is also superstition on their part.' Shahu Maharaj felt that this kind of behaviour went against intellect and reason. He did not stop at publicly opposing illiteracy, ignorance and discrimination, but also carried out many a social reform as an extension of his efforts to eradicate superstition.

'The influence of tradition causes an intellectual stupor, and people lose the ability to distinguish between good and bad,' said Justice Ranade on the wide scope of the work for propagating rationalism. 'Instead of using their reasoning powers, they surrender to some external forces.' The irrational behaviour of

many a group under the influence of this stupor is seen everywhere in our society. Such incidents prove how difficult it is to bring about social reform with the help of reason.

'Why are you afraid of unorthodox opinions?' Agarkar would ask people. His question is pertinent even today because people tend to respond to nonconformist ideas not with argument but by suppressing them. 'We are much too scared of popular censure,' he added. 'If Socrates, Copernicus or Galileo weren't as courageous as they were, Europe's ignorance would have never vanished. Merely acquiring knowledge is of no use if you're not brave enough to practise unconventional, new ways.' Of course, Agarkar was aware that walking the talk wasn't easy. That is why his motto was: 'I will speak of that which is desirable and do that which is possible.' It is important to reiterate what is good for and what should happen in the society. If it is put into practice, nothing like it. But to refrain from sharing an important thought, simply because it isn't possible to practise, isn't right.

While waging a war on superstition, one needs to be aware of how far its repercussions go. 'The days of raising a social system based on religious scriptures are gone,' Savarkar said. 'Now, in this modern age, a society ought to be organised specifically on scientific and secular principles.' Savarkar categorised superstitious people into three types—those who are ignorant and innocent, the ones who are informed but fearful, and shrewd professionals (peddlers of superstition). The first kind practises superstitions because of their naivety. The second type knows that superstition is wrong but is hesitant to go against traditional norms. The third category is altogether different. These devils exploit people and fill their own pockets. Activists engaged in the eradication of superstition and comprehensive social reform should be aware of this distinction.

'In the Indian renaissance, what should be the philosophical and practical basis for the anti-superstition movement?' Dr Ambedkar asked. To answer this question, one needs to refer to India's unique caste system. In Europe's class-based society, religion is composed of scriptures and theology, and their spiritual and practical aspects. But in our country, the real nature of Hinduism, the main religion, is that it's not a single group. It is made up of innumerable caste sections.

A large portion of society was hitherto banned from

education. They weren't allowed to own any property. Religion was equated with the strict implementation of these restrictions, and this system was strengthened through inheritance. A long tradition of deriving caste and the accompanying social bans from parents was fixed in the mindset of our populace. The submissive attitude this engendered was protected and nurtured by the concepts of theism and beliefs in incarnation, miracles, spirituality and the dominance of the priestly class. So, to criticise this Brahmin-ruled religious structure, a more radical method of investigation had become necessary. In the god-centred Hindu religion sustained by castes, a system of widespread blind faith was and is entrenched at the physical, mental and religious levels. This led to mental slavery, which has grown over the centuries. For the exploitative Brahmins, it was a psyche of feeling satisfied and protected and benefiting from people's slavery. An attack on superstition was construed as an insult to this psyche itself. Both the exploiters and the exploited readily supported this situation. That is why nothing like the all-encompassing Renaissance, which reformed European society, could take place in India.

The Renaissance in Europe spread and swelled up, cutting through authority into religion, culture, and fields such as sociology. Copernicus rubbished the geocentric system mentioned in the Bible and proposed a heliocentric theory in its place. Various artists went against the rule that required them to dedicate their work solely to god. That led to the modernisation of painting, music, dance, etc. Intellectuals such as Descartes and Voltaire challenged traditional 'godly' values using rational arguments. Litterateurs, from Dante to Shakespeare, made human emotions the central themes of their writings. But in India, the dread of not being validated by traditions continued hampering free interaction and exchange of ideas. This has made the eradication of superstition a difficult process.

The caste system led to the division of not only labour but also intellectual products. Learning and teaching were purely Brahminical professions, while the Shudras were denied any sort of education so it could be easier to exploit and control them. Those who dared to disregard this diktat were severely punished. To permanently enforce the ban on learning, the caste system turned the creation of knowledge into a pious activity while it

did the opposite for toiling. Even today, this rule hampers the work of uplifting people's thought processes.

At the start of the twenty-first century, 50 per cent of the world's illiterate population resided in India. Of the world's 600 crore people globally, 110 crore live in our country. It is a modest expectation that at least 6 per cent of the nation's public expenditure be spent on education. But this figure hasn't gone above 3.5 per cent so far, unlike many other countries, where the spend is three times ours. Phule and Ambedkar felt the policy of universal formal education was the key to the intellectual awakening of the masses and a precursor to rationalism. Such widespread learning is bound to prevent exploitative superstition.

Hinduism doesn't have a prophet or an organised religious system with a central authority. Instead, devotees are free to worship their own individual choice of god. The concept of the incarnation of god is part of the Hindu's DNA. It provides a tangible face and body to the abstract concept of god. The desire to see god as a discernible object or person has nourished a crowd of godmen all over the country—from tiny hamlets to megacities. The decentralisation of Hinduism was also a tactic by the Brahmins to divide other castes, make them socio-culturally different from each other and even pit them against one another. Subsequently, babas, buvas and gurus acquired extreme importance, especially as 'avatars' of god.

'The Hindu priestly class is in no way culturally, morally or in any other respect superior to its Parsi counterpart,' Dr Ambedkar said. 'Among the Hindus, the priesthood is inherited in the family, which is not the case with the Parsis. One can make innumerable charges against a Hindu priest. This class is an impediment, which brings the cultural wheel to a standstill. The priest pretends to be the middleman between an unknown power and a helpless man and thereby wins his bread.'

The babas, buvas, gurus and priests refused to reject religious knowledge passed down from our ancestors or criticise Hindu scriptures, Puranic stories or epics. Instead, they used their religious power and intellectual skills to validate the Hindu texts. Activists involved in the eradication of superstition should keep this larger perspective in mind.

Two other aspects help the priestly class in achieving their

goals even today. The first is the electronic media. It overwhelms viewers with TV shows highlighting the miraculous powers of mantras, experiences of divine intervention, incredible capabilities of gifted men and other such concepts. The urban population, including scientists, don't even try to raise a united opposition. Capitalists sponsor such serials because they earn crores of revenue. Religious fanatics back them to secure more voters.

The second aspect that helps the priestly class is the emergence of capitalists and traders, mostly from the Bania community. Do note that the monopoly exercised by a specific caste in trade is instrumental in boosting profits. The Banias are, therefore, natural supporters of the caste system. To sustain their stranglehold on this structure, they join hands with political powers that support eulogising religion, following superstition and spreading communal hatred.

How to fight these antagonists remains the biggest question in the anti-superstition movement. That's where the work of our social reformers can serve as a guiding light for ANiS's activists. During the European Renaissance, the fight was between spiritualism as promulgated by Christianity and the materialism supported by capitalists. In India's caste-ridden and colour-based society, the conflict is between Brahminical tradition—which supports casteism and women's slavery—and rational thought, which opposes the caste–colour discrimination and roots for women's empowerment. This is a peculiar chapter in the history of social conflicts. That is why our social reformers were inspired by the likes of Sankhya, Lokayat, Basaveshwara and the Buddha. (All of whom were atheists who opposed Brahminical supremacy.)

The anti-superstition movement may or may not directly confront vested interests, but activists should always be aware that exploitation makes people helpless and pushes them towards superstition. Even if the relationship between exploiters and the exploited changes, the superstitions supported by them won't automatically disappear. They can only be combated through psychological change. Our social reformers were always aware of the largeness of the scope of this movement, and their words will guide those continuing it.

7

Secularism

The final part in our plan for the eradication of superstition is to act in tandem with the larger social-reform movement, which shares the core values enshrined in the preamble of our Constitution. The preamble explicitly promises that the Indian nation will be constituted as a socialist, secular democracy. These values and the movement for the eradication of superstition are synchronous. If the latter succeeds in bringing about a change in the psyche of Indian society, the possibility of putting these values into practice will increase. Also, if socialism, secularism and an effective democracy are engendered in our country, ANiS's efforts to uproot superstition will automatically accelerate.

The principle of secularism especially is closely connected with the movement for the eradication of superstition. Even the Supreme Court maintains that secularism is the fundamental principle that supports the entire structure of the Constitution. If the movement successfully brings about a comprehensive change in society, it will take us a step closer to improving our social lives. But none of these measures are easy to implement. This is because, to achieve all of these, ANiS is required to criticise religion, which results in being called anti-religious by its adversaries. This image becomes stronger with the fact that a majority of the Samiti's activists are non-believers (in either god or religion).

Along with religiosity, a progressive line of thought on secularism has also developed. Every individual has the freedom to practise any religion. However, this progressive line of thought warns us that neither should religion be allowed to

meddle in public life nor should the state pamper with or nurture any religion. Here, our country's social reality is a big impediment, which needs to be taken into account. Most people are brought up with religious sentiments that have been developed over millennia. They are unable to leave religion at home and participate in their social lives. There has been no awakening or practical education in secularism. On the contrary, religion is being brought into our social lives with a vengeance. The media plays a huge role in advancing religiosity and blind faith. Political parties, which should be responsible for edifying the masses, prefer to appease them instead. The biggest obstacle is that the state, which is responsible for safeguarding secularism, is being led by those who ignore their administrative duties and responsibilities. The Gujarat riots are the perfect example of such conduct. This is the state of affairs in which ANiS advocates a secular, constructive and positive dialogue with the people.

Development of secularism in Europe

It was Marsiglio da Padova who first propounded the idea of a secular state in Italy in the fourteenth century. He proposed that mundane life should be governed by human or man-made laws and that the authority of drafting these should rest with the state, not religious bodies. The supreme rule of religion was thus challenged by the power of the state. It was quite a revolutionary thought in those days.

The religious bodies didn't yield so easily. This was an age of development in Europe. There were scientific discoveries, technological inventions and the rise of avant-garde philosophers; the new Protestant sect posed a challenge to the dominance of the priestly class; and there was a boom in trade and communication with other countries. All these factors led to a scrutiny of religion, which caused a turmoil in the entire continent. The wrangle continued until the eighteenth century.

However, no such Renaissance happened in India. Though science gate-crashed into the country, we had capitalism develop as an offshoot of imperialism. Religion here has always been rooted in the caste system. In fact, the caste system itself had become a religion. Islam, Christianity and other faiths, too, couldn't attain immunity from its contagion. There was no study

or examination of religion in our country, so we had an insufficient number of logical debates for secular thoughts to flourish.

Interestingly, there are multiple examples of rulers in medieval India who were tolerant of religions other than their own. That is how Hinduism continued to flourish during the seven centuries of Muslim rule. Aurangzeb's prime minister until his death was a Hindu named Raghupatidas. Aurangzeb also provided a yearly endowment to the Jagannath temple in Puri. Tipu Sultan rebuilt the Sharada temple at Shrungeri, which the Marathas plundered in 1791. The infantry of Rana Pratap's army was led by Hakimatkhan, a Pathan. Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj honoured a copy of the Koran that was seized during the mayhem of war. The Peshwas too funded the construction of many a mosque.

This was the background in which the struggle for Indian Independence began. People of all castes and religions participated in the movement, putting everything at stake. It was evidence that a multireligious, multiracial and multicultural society, such as India, could be built into a nation only on a secular basis. And India thoughtfully became a secular state, despite the partition of the country on religious grounds. Although the word 'secularism' found its place in our Constitution as late as 1976, articles 25, 26, 27 and 28, which are part of the Constitution since its inception, give a clear idea about the kind of secularism espoused by India. No amendments whatsoever have been made to any of these during the last six decades and more, though. No need was felt to do so. Yet, advocates of a 'Hindu nation' brand secularism as a way of appeasement of the minorities and a blind imitation of the West.

Secularism as per the Constitution

Article 25 is of utmost importance for ANiS. It explains secularism through these points.

- Every citizen in India has the right to pursue worship, religion, transcendental beatitude or spiritual sublimation of his/her own choice.
- The state shall not discriminate between individuals in the

name of religion in political or social life.
- The state shall not help, oppose or interfere with religious practices.
- In India, religion rules over the social life of the people. Yet, the state can enact laws for social welfare and reform. In case any religion comes in the way of justice regarding social ethics, law and order, general health or national integrity, the state shall restrict the freedom of that religion.

As per this article, individuals get to decide their place of worship—be it a temple, mosque, church or something else. Deciding which god to worship—Allah, Jesus, the Buddha or none of them—is also that individual's privilege, irrespective of whether he or she is a Hindu, Muslim, Christian or anything else. If intellectually convinced about it, anyone can convert to any other faith, establish a new one or refute all religions. None of these acts affect the individual's status, restrict rights, or afford any extra prerogatives as an Indian citizen. The state can neither have its likes or dislikes nor be partial in the name of religion. The state shall neither oppose nor help an individual in the practice of a religion, but remain neutral on the matter.

However, in India, religion is also an instrument of exploitation. Religious influence, which has controlled society, approves of such oppression. The state can put an end to it by enacting laws for social welfare and reform. For instance, some people consider untouchability part of their religion and do not allow Dalits to fetch water from their well. But if that well is part of the village commons, untouchability cannot be practised simply because it is permitted by religion. For the same reason, Maharashtra's legislative assembly has passed a bill banning magical and inhuman acts. Even if some people claim that these things are permitted by their religion, they won't be able to practise them, as they're illegal. (It must be noted that there are many crooks who still do.)

The state can also interfere in matters of public health, morality, law and order, and national integrity. An individual has the right to believe that Vithoba will protect them from all evils. But they cannot refuse to immunise themselves against a disease like cholera, claiming that their faith in the deity is enough to

protect them. Similarly, the procession of naked devotees to Chandragutti (in Karnataka's Shimoga district) was banned because an event such as this is shocking to public morality, despite the devotees' insistence that it is a religious practice for them. The state can also change the route of any religious procession if the originally decided path could create a law-and-order problem. For example, Amritsar's Golden Temple, the holiest place for the Sikh community, once became a hub for the Khalistanis to organise attacks on the Indian government and plot to secede from India. The army had to break into the shrine to intervene. The piety of the temple was not as important as defeating the secessionists.

The writers of the Constitution had on their minds the positive meaning of secularism as mentioned in the preamble. It is an understanding that evolved during our freedom struggle when it became clear that the nation will be able to endure only on the basis of secularism. However, to practise secularism, it was necessary to guarantee employment, abolish economic disparity, adopt a scientific outlook and put a common civil code in place. Only then could an atmosphere conducive to the peaceful coexistence of all religions have thrived.

To inculcate secularism, the fact that religion influences social life in India in many ways has to be taken into account. Sarva-dharma-samabhava (to accord due respect to all religions) does not mean supporting exploitation and obsolete rituals, or insisting on extreme atheism. No efforts have been made to educate Indian citizens about the positive meaning of secularism. On the contrary, most political parties have adopted an opportunistic stand, with one eye on vote banks. A lack of awakening among the people and the compromising positions adopted by politicos make it all the more difficult for a secular life to find favour.

The hurricane of globalisation has fanned and fuelled fanaticism. It increases the exploitation of the poor without giving them a chance to understand whom to hold responsible. The underprivileged, with their local resources and traditional skills, the only means of earning for them, are ousted from their occupations. The saddest consequence of globalisation is that it reduces social concern and sensitivity, resulting in the absence of material security and safety among the poor. A large number of

people trapped in a cycle of deprivation and insecurity turn to religious rituals, worship and observances for their peace of mind. On the other hand, those who possess riches and wish to safeguard and increase them also turn to religion or a guru. Agenda-driven political parties then see to it that these gullible people seek religion for support thoughtlessly and fervently. These parties instil arrogant pride for one's own religion and hatred for other faiths in the minds of their followers. They invent imaginary enemies, who can then be blamed for all social ills. Such a psyche turns material conflict, which is the actual case, into a religious one. People express love for their religion through rituals and ceremonies, in which religious frenzy and superstitious practices prevail over reason. Where there was previously cooperation between religions, the feeling changes to one of hatred. Religion is, therefore, used not for boosting morality on the basis of truth and non-violence but for strengthening political power. Increasing pride in one's religion (greeting each other with 'Jai Shri Ram', 'Jai Ganesh' or 'Hari Om'), religious nationalism (organising public rituals, ceremonies and festivals), communalism (instigating riots in the name of religion) and fanaticism (refusing people of other religions the right to live or treating them like secondary citizens, as desired by the Taliban or Togadia) become the norm. All this is blatantly contradictory to secularism.

Through its work, ANiS works to develop a social psyche that vehemently opposes thoughtless religious hatred. Its activities are part of a larger secularist movement. Anti-secularism forces, therefore, oppose ANiS and brand its work as a destruction of religion. In a way, it is an acknowledgement of the Samiti's influence.

Numerous common misunderstandings and prejudices are deliberately encouraged and dispersed so that religion can be used for political purposes and to hamper the spread of secularism. It is necessary to understand the errors in the zealots' arguments. Their most vicious and clever statement is: 'Not every Muslim is a traitor, but every traitor is invariably a Muslim.' What they mean by this is 'Weren't those who attacked the Parliament, Red Fort, BSE, Akshardham temple, Mumbai's local trains and the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel all Muslims?' At a glance, the argument may appear, to many of us, as an irrefutable

statement. But the answer to this indictment needs to be properly understood.

- Take a look at this argument: 'As terrorists happen to be of a particular religion, that specific religion teaches terrorism and all those who believe in that religion should be suspected of terrorism'. This is both wrong and perilous. Like a boomerang, it can be turned against those who advance it. Punjab was agitated by a terrorist movement demanding secession from the country. Our country had to pay a huge price to assuage it. But nobody called it a case of Sikh terrorism. In Sri Lanka, LTTE was engaged in armed rebellion for several years. All its members were Hindus, but the incidents weren't categorised under Hindu terrorism. Nor are the activities of the Naxalites, active in many parts of India, most of whom are Hindus. Some sadhvis and swamis have also been involved in terrorist activities, but that doesn't mean that Hinduism promotes terrorism.

  Terrorists want to enforce a change through violence. They are brainwashed by organisations that impress the wrong thoughts upon their minds. Religion is one of the tools that come in handy for the purpose. That is why in Pakistan, the Talibanis, who boast about being die-hard Islamists, fight against their own Muslim brethren. Iraq, ever since Saddam Hussein's defeat, has been in a state of tension. Shias, Sunnis and Talibanis—all Muslims—are at war with each other, killing hundreds of thousands of people. Considering these events all around the world, it is wrong to label every Muslim as a terrorist and, therefore, a traitor.
- Of course, those who participate in anti-national and destructive activities should be dealt with as severely as possible. Even military force may be used for the same.
- Muslims have largely remained a backward community in India. What is needed is for the state to ensure that they receive proper education in their mother tongue. Efforts should be made to give them equal career opportunities in all respects—dignity, jobs, etc. Along with this, they should be convinced that accepting extremist philosophies

advocated by organisations such as the Tablighi Jamaat is certainly not in their interest.

- The friendship between Hindus and Muslims should be boosted at all levels. Pakistan fought three wars with our country expecting our Muslims to go against India and side with Pakistan in the attacks—at least covertly—or remain neutral. But the opposite happened. For instance, Muslims in north-western Gujarat, adjoining the border of southern Pakistan, where they are in majority, helped the Indian army during the three wars. In light of this history, it is a grave mistake to call such a big section of our society terrorists.
- The great stamp-paper scam masterminded by Abdul Karim Telgi involved many senior police officers, several of whom were non-Muslims. Harshad Mehta committed such a huge monetary embezzlement that it jeopardised the entire economic structure of our country. The explosives used in the various Mumbai blasts were transported into the city from the Konkan coast through a host of checkpoints. The corrupt officers who let the explosives pass through these posts without a hitch weren't Muslims. Clearly, traitors and extremists do not have a religion.

Common civil code

The Constitution has bestowed on the state the right to make the necessary laws for social progress. So, there is nothing wrong with legislating a common civil code. But this move is not acceptable if the intention is to peg it against Muslims.

While drafting a common civil code, the Hindu code bills cannot be accepted as they are. Those laws too require reform. If provisions are made in the common civil code for gender equality, equal share for women in property, etc., will Hindu society accept it?

At present, 95 per cent of the law is equal for everyone. So is the Criminal Procedure Code, as well as regulations for buying and selling and income tax. Only the personal laws differ by religion: namely, marriage, divorce, maintenance, alimony and adoption. These kinds of laws should be part of a uniform civil code that tailors the laws to fit each individual—equally

opposing all exploitative and unjust customs and rituals in every religion.

Currently, Hindu political organisations are clamouring for a common civil code to further their politics. When Shiv Sena and BJP were in power in Maharashtra, they passed a bill applicable to all religions, prohibiting men from having more than one spouse at a time. The bill was then forwarded to the central government for approval. The prime minister at that time was a BJP member, and Shiv Sena was a prominent partner in power. Thus, it wasn't at all difficult to get the president's nod for it. However, the Sangh Parivar, which had persistently demanded the bill when not in power, chose to turn a blind eye to it.

If the common civil code abolishes the subordinate status given to women in the name of religion, it ought to be adopted. If a Muslim man is allowed to have more than one spouse, it is certainly unfair to his first wife. But the rationale that polygamy will increase the population of Muslims, and that it will soon exceed that of Hindus in India, is erroneous. It is true that the population growth rate among Muslims is slightly higher than in the case of Hindus. But considering this small increase and the proportion of Muslims in the total population of India, it will take Muslims another 250 years to surpass the number of Hindus! To believe that Muslims won't ever use birth-control devices is nothing but stark ignorance about social processes. The state of Kerala is 100 per cent literate, while in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, people are mostly illiterate. The rate of population growth among Kerala's Muslims is less than that of the Hindus in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. The reason is obvious. The Muslim women of Kerala, being educated, understand the importance of family planning, whereas UP's illiterate women are unaware of it. Moreover, family planning isn't compulsory, so Hindus can reject it and have more kids. But the truth is that a large number of Hindus are increasingly adopting family-planning methods and restricting the number of their children. The realisation that a small family is crucial to their happiness and prosperity, and beneficial to the nation too, has dawned on them. This will surely occur to Muslim society too, with better education and reduced child mortality. Similarly, the belief that a Muslim man marries four women and bears several children is malicious. The sex ratio among India's Muslims at present is 937 females to

1,000 males. Therefore, it is possible for only 234 Muslim men out of every 1,000 to marry four women, while the rest will have to remain bachelors!

Rationalisation of Hindu–Muslim relations

Everyone should understand that the issue of Hindu–Muslim relations is that of peaceful coexistence, with secularism as the rational foundation. The population of Muslims in India is around 17–18 crore. Some fanatical Hindu organisations insist that all our Muslim friends be eliminated, exiled from our country, or made to accept a second-class citizenship. Even practical common sense tells us that the idea of killing or banishing 17–18 crore people from a country is nothing short of lunacy. To treat them as second-class citizens too is unthinkable in a democracy. Yet, these outrageous measures are suggested, as they're believed to provide an illusion of safety—the kind one feels while carrying a bomb in one's pocket. That's because there is a widespread misunderstanding that Muslim society is beyond reform.

The reality, though, is otherwise. France became a 100-year-old constitutional secular democracy in 2005. On this occasion, the government relaxed the need for its citizens to publicly display their religious identities. Of the 50 lakh Muslims in the country, many women expressed a readiness to give up their veils. On the other hand, not all of the 4,000 Sikhs in France were willing to stop wearing turbans. So, they were granted permission to continue wearing them. This process of change, resistance and dialogue strengthens secularism.

Some forces are constantly engaged in raising a Hindu vote bank. They are canvassing for every Hindu citizen to vote only for a candidate of the same religion. This is not only unwise but also quite dangerous. The Supreme Court has ruled that nobody can campaign for votes on religious grounds, and that if anyone breaks this law and is still elected as a member of a governmental body, their membership will be cancelled.

Every individual has his own sovereign value, which has nothing to do with religion. Asking for a vote based on religion refutes the individual's sovereign value and freedom. This mixing of religion with politics threatens to end secularism, and when

that dangerous blend is coupled with violence, it jeopardises democracy. That democracy thrives in a huge multireligious, multilingual and multiracial nation such as India is an object of admiration and respect for the world, and it can survive only if it remains secular.

The sociology of secularism

The real problem is: how do we make society secular? It is important to remember that every individual has the right to believe in their faith and carry out rituals and religious practices, even though others may find them obsolete and meaningless. At the same time, people are entitled to criticise traditions. While faith ought to be respected, disallowing the censure of anything associated with that faith is wrong. In fact, a society's progress is based on its examination of faith. If faith was not questioned at all, we would still revere fire as Mahadev, and not see it as a product of friction, or utilise it as we do.

Our social reformers and saints have had a series of rational, constructive discourses on faith with the people of Maharashtra. The creation of a secular social psyche requires the opposition of unscientific, meaningless rituals and exploitation, in accordance with the teachings of these visionaries.

Religious pride finds a place in the minds of the gullible as an escape from their everyday problems. Politics needs to emphasise these routine struggles in a secular manner so that everyone realises that they are different and more pressing than religious issues. This will help push society towards secularism. Moreover, the state is expected to be secular in its communication and dealings, instead of pandering to the unreasonable, exploitative and superstitious demands of various religions. All political parties should thoroughly understand what secularism means and respect its importance for the survival of a multireligious country such as ours.

The opposition of obsolete, meaningless rituals becomes difficult when people are emotionally attached to them. For instance, if you calculate the total time wasted at the national level waiting for a crow to touch the pinda (rice balls) offered after the death of a loved one, it would run into crores of hours. But people express annoyance if anyone even alludes to the fact

that it is an irrational practice. They will, if anything, defend their own exploitation. In another example, when the court ruled that women should receive alimony after talaq, Muslim women felt (or rather, were convinced by cunning forces) that this was an interference with Islam's religious commands. In fact, several women even demonstrated against the verdict.

Many feel that the daily struggle of their lives is severe enough to make them secular. But the reality is exactly the opposite. People join (non-religious) leftist workers' unions and fight along with them for monetary rights. However, in other walks of life, they are as devout as their fellow citizens. Also, the state is supposed to be strictly secular, as it should be. Yet, one of India's main political parties calls our nation a 'Hindu rashtra'. It even maintains that if our country isn't a Hindu land today, it ought to be made one in the future. It has gone on to adopt a fanatical stand to achieve this goal. When such parties come into power, it is difficult for the state to remain secular.

In short, there are three essential aspects to engendering a secular culture: opposing exploitative religious customs and rituals, directing people towards secularism by helping them deal with their everyday problems, and putting pressure on political powers to embrace secularism. However, none of these propositions are easy in practice. It is becoming tougher nowadays for secularism to thrive. The people of India have been traditionally tolerant of other religions. But due to politics, this spirit has now assumed the form of religious conceit, self-importance, hatred and fanaticism. But we now have organisations such as ANiS, which endeavour to criticise religion and start a conversation with people on the same.

How do we do this? The Samiti feels the answer lies in the spiritual ratiocinations by Mahatma Phule, Vitthal Ramji Shinde and Gadge Maharaj, among others, who in turn were inspired by our long line of secular saints. The religion they proposed to establish was essentially an awakening of reason. They wanted to see 'a good Hindu become a yet more moral Hindu'. 'The search for truth is the purpose of religion and non-violence is its regimen,' Mahatma Gandhi said. 'That good will finally prevail is the faith of religion.' This stand gives Gandhi the right to examine religion to search for truth without negating it and obliterate the part of Hinduism that supports untouchability.

Mahatma Phule floated the idea of a family where the father may pray in a mosque, mother to Jesus in a church and the child to a Hindu god, yet all of them live under the same roof with love and in harmony. Vinoba Bhave too believed that an individual should have the right to decide which religion they'd like to follow. These thoughts concur with the idea of a critical, humanist religion. More importantly, they underline society's real problems.

The nineteenth-century movement of constructive religious awakening in India oriented religion towards society, and away from the 'other' world, by shifting its centre from god to man. It talked about social, cultural and political justice. It sought to make religion socially aware by insisting on educating women, eradicating untouchability and opposing idol worship.

An individual becomes religious when he need security. Because that's when he can act with the freedom to create and facilitate development and progress. Normally, the system that provides security, freedom and opportunities for progress is an ethical one. Yet, today, a citizen feels more insecure than ever, and lacks both freedom and opportunities—nor is he hopeful of ever achieving these. In such circumstances, a person seeks courage and motivation in the concept of religion. That's why our reformers constructively investigated religion with the aim of creating a superior society.

Besides 'regulating' thoughts and behaviour, religion also claims to help one control emotions—lust, anger, greed, desire, etc.—and emancipate one through kindness, love, mercy and compassion. So, when rationalists try to 'restrain emotions and ethically enhance thinking', is their goal any different from that of religion? Nevertheless, what is needed is a change in the current reality, i.e. to abolish exploitation. There are other to-dos as well, which our present-day rationalists are already working on to the best of their capacities. A dialogue between a religious and a non-religious person can also widen the base for secularism.

Secularism neither means sarva-dharma-samabhava nor just separation of religion from politics, and certainly not appeasement of minorities and injustice to the majority, i.e. the Hindus. Secularism is a way of building ideal relationships between an individual and religion, religion and state, individual

and society, and individual and other religious communities. Secularism is not out to eradicate religion, but it certainly wants to control exploitation, and above all, rationalise religion. It is necessary to make this multidimensional and purposeful concept of secularism an integral part of the social life in our country. The mere adoption of secularism by the state does not make society secular. An expression of the emotional essence of secularism among citizens is the need of the hour. This essence is nothing but the awakening of reasoning that our saints and social reformers tried to engender in religion.

8

Rationalism

Organised religion dominated humanity for a long time. It had a vice-like grip on every aspect of individual and social matters.

And then, between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, Renaissance in Europe brought about new thought in science, philosophy, literature and the arts. These chipped away at the authority of religion. The physical experience of human surroundings through the sensory organs caused people to question religious mandate. A rational perspective towards society and human life—the scientific outlook—evolved out of the revolution and unveiled the benefits of an objective, secular and law-governed world to humanity. It became possible for man to become more self-aware, which wasn't the case when he had been a slave to religious customs, rituals and traditions. The various experiences he garnered by travelling around the world enriched his mind and paved the way for him to discover unconventional means of acquiring and generating knowledge. Man, thus, learned to rely on himself.

According to Hegel, the German philosopher, this new, rational outlook was an attribute of both individual and collective development. Because man is an animal, he, like other creatures, is part of nature. At one stage in his evolution, he broke away from nature. With his cognition, he started to gain self-consciousness. History is the progress of this dialectical process. Hegel felt that the phenomenon of self-awareness was in its most rudimentary form in the societal systems of Asia and Africa, while in Europe, it almost reached its zenith during Renaissance. Marx accepted Hegel's theory. He removed from it the notion of idealistic spirituality, and rooted it in materialism

instead, giving us a novel method for the interpretation of human history.

At about the same time, due to developments in science, nature no longer appeared as cruel and spiteful as it did before. It looked almost tame and open to investigation. Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer tracked the progress of nature and man using their respective theories of evolution. The scientific outlook gave us confidence that we could grasp Earth's material reality with the help of our intellect, and that there was nothing mysterious here that we couldn't understand. Marxist socialist thought geared up to overthrow capitalist mechanism and attain control over the means of production. The toiling masses had become ready to put this productive capacity to use for social welfare.

But many significant doubts were raised over the concept of collective rationalism and 'its ability to make history'. Sigmund Freud investigated the unconscious part of the human mind, which man could now observe in hindsight. It was revealed that human reason has no control over this part. According to Freud, one's repressed emotions, desires and impulses remain operative in the unconscious mind, but in a distorted form. They are suppressed there, as they are believed to cause damage to society's value system. And they are equally (or rather much more) responsible for building one's ego. This concept of the unconscious mind challenged the sovereignty of both individual and collective reasoning.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, a new thought, known as postmodernism, condemned rationalism and blamed it for the calamities in human culture. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was dismantled in December 1991. In the process, the collective rationalism of the Hegel–Marx tradition was denounced. Technological rationalism in the form of the computer and internet and the pragmatic capitalist rationalism of privatisation and liberalisation began to prevail.

Many people feel that there is currently no 'doer' in our sight, such as the group of Marxian workers committed to relieving the masses from slavery. There is nobody, they say, who can stand up to the combined power of machines and capital. Today's leaders are decided on the basis of religion, caste, language, race, gender, province, tribe, etc. It isn't

necessary to fit the individual ego into the uniform frame of a caste or similar identity. Yet, the part played by these factors in building one's ego has to be acknowledged.

It is obvious that movements based on such identities endeavour to protect them in the capitalist space. Talk of their 'rights', with a few exceptions, does not aspire to penetrate the capitalist space. The scope of the modern capitalist system is vast. At the global level, human transactions are increasingly becoming interdependent and mechanical. In this new world, the problem before the rationalist movement is whether a universal, collective rationalism that encourages pluralism and commits itself to the building of a just society can be freshly thought out.

ANiS progressed in the field of ratiocination through action. It began with the constructive criticism of religion, proceeded through secularism and has now reached humanism, where it is firm. Although ANiS is known as a movement that opposes superstition and the exploitation it causes, the Samiti is heading towards inclusive reform and will eventually arrive at rationalism. All ANiS activists are aware of this objective.

Religion and ethics

'Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing wonder and awe, the oftener and the more steadily I reflect upon them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me,' said the philosopher Immanuel Kant. 'I do not merely conjecture them and seek them as if they were obscured in darkness or in the transcendent region beyond my horizon: I see them before me, and I connect them directly with the consciousness of my own existence . . . The former view of a countless multitude of worlds annihilates, as it were, my importance as an "animal creature" which must give back to the planet (a mere speck in the universe) the matter for which it came, matter which is for a little time endowed with vital force, we know not how. The latter, on the contrary, infinitely raises my worth as that of an "intelligence" by my being a person in whom the moral law reveals to me a life independent of all animality and even of the whole world of sense, at least so far as it may be inferred from the final destination assigned to my existence by this law, a destination which is not restricted to the conditions and

boundaries of this life but reaches into the infinite.'

Awareness of morality is the fundamental concern of religion. Kant's argument isn't irrefutable, but in the backdrop of religious faith, he thanked religion and god for it.

Human reason searches for the answers to Kant's questions more realistically. It pertains to two areas—knowledge and behaviour. In the case of the former, a scientific outlook helps one's reason decide what is true and what isn't. One's rationale is then derived from concrete evidence and rigorous logic. Religious faith has to invariably yield to such reason.

Man's reason also determines which behaviour is proper and which isn't. Selflessness, accompanied by a consideration for others' feelings, is an important criterion of rational conduct. A human being remains self-centred until nearly eight years of age. As the rationality in their mind develops, selfishness gives way to social awareness, which reveals the causality of ethical behaviour. It tells us, 'Do unto others as you would others do unto you.' Rationality, thus, leads to an ethical outlook towards human life.

Man's behaviour emanates from his drive for gratification, fame, etc., as well as a susceptibility to superstition. Rationality too is a factor, but many a time, it isn't forceful enough. Critical examination, mindful conduct, a scientific outlook, and a rational foundation for thoughts and actions are the highlights of one's progress from the eradication of superstition to rationalism.

Rationality is the distinctive characteristic of human beings; they alone are capable of it in the entire animal kingdom. It is revealed in actual living because only conduct and actions can be good or bad. Rationality doesn't mean cleverness, as the latter isn't related to behaviour. On the other hand, rationality accepts only the good. It determines whether a decision taken by the intellect is sensible, while also considering its propriety in terms of intellect, values, emotions, faith and everything else that constitutes human life. With rationality, one's behaviour no longer depends on religion, and the criterion for validity shifts from scriptures and traditions to reason. Thus, rationalism takes the place of religious faith as a secular philosophy. Its fundamental criteria, i.e. human well-being and dignity, become the pivot of human behaviour.

Man is a thinking animal, and his abilities of discernment

lead to rationality. Likewise, he is also a social animal, and his rationality is rooted in his sociability as well. Rationalism asserts that natural phenomena can be understood only by secular methods. It seeks to restructure human dealings and social relations in the interest of the individual and the society, for human goodness is possible and can exist only with reference to society. The rationality of a man living all alone on an island makes no sense.

While spelling out what is rationally good, it is essential to take into account this social context of rationality. If being social is considered a precondition of human existence, it means that man's self-centeredness will be replaced by thoughtfulness for others and a regard for all of humanity. In short, it translates to good, rational behaviour. Rationalism is the philosophy of a happy human life, that is in consonance with the entire human race, as well as other life forms and the whole of nature. Moreover, the ways to acquire this happiness should be reasonable. Rationalism aims at the all-round enrichment of humanity. To become a rationalist is to transform egocentrism into social awareness and go beyond the limits of self-satisfaction to the level of universal bliss.

Human ethics are secular and do not emanate from religion or divine power. Because man lives in a society, his future depends upon values such as sympathy, compassion, mercy, non-violence and social cooperation. These are instinctive to some extent. In the long period of biological evolution and socialisation, these ethical qualities have been nourishing human life and have become humanity's natural tendencies. This fact falsifies the argument that religion is the only basis of morality and that man, being selfish by nature, cannot become moral without the dread of falling foul of religious doctrine.

Ethics are natural tendencies that have developed in the course of evolution and have proven to be useful for sustaining human life. Man feels satisfied whenever he is able to fulfil any of these tendencies or impulses. That is why moral human beings are also happy people. Charity and benevolence bring them satisfaction while seeing others suffer makes them sad. The conscience—the sense of discriminating between the good and the bad—which is the basis of morality, is not a divine gift. It does not need the support of religion, god or a higher power. It is

a mentality that was born in the course of evolution and makes man's life fruitful and satisfying.

The most important point is that anyone can sharpen their rationality and conscience and become thoroughly moral. God and religion aren't indispensable for one to practise ethics. For an individual to be happy, society—and thus individuals—ought to be moral. This causal relationship between society and individual is self-evident. As the morality of a rational man is self-inspired, he is independent yet moral. Free will is the special characteristic of humankind alone. All other creatures are slaves to their environment. Man is the only animal that can qualitatively channelise his surroundings and inner power using rationality. Retrogressive forces such as irrational superstitions, religious traditions, age-old customs and political pressures from dictators all intend to defeat man's rational conscience and destroy the very foundation of ethics and humaneness.

Rationalism is ANiS's philosophy because its broader aim is to fight all kinds of exploitation and mental enslavement. Rationalism insists that human conscience, rather than religious faith, be the ruling principle. Morality as the basis of human interactions should rest on reason and not religion. However, even today, the rules of commerce among individuals, family, social systems and state organisations hinge on religiosity to a great extent. Morality aims to show the rational nature of dealings and bring it into practice.

What is necessary now is an appropriate social system that supports the expression of the ethical tendency that man has developed through evolution. The force of rationality in society and the requisite societal structure for this expression are interdependent. That is why ANiS has no issues with people whose behaviour is ethical but who credit it to their religiosity and not rationality. The Samiti is ready to have a discussion with them.

An argument negating the theory of human ethics resulting through evolution is that man came as the end product and arrived on Earth as an altogether distinct being. That while animal life is bound by causality, man is independent of it. He reaches beyond causality and becomes a 'doer', taking decisions independently. To explain this phenomenon—so goes the argument—it is necessary to assume a supernatural principle in

the universe and man.

What is the reality of this argument?

Over the millennia, simple organisms evolved into more complex creatures. Anatomically modern human ancestors appeared over one million years ago. This human is capable of understanding nature, and discerning which particular act out of all possible ones is the most fruitful. One can examine man's actions as right or wrong. The criteria for such an evaluation are not based on natural causality but usability and propriety. Although man's freedom to assess his acts and behave accordingly has its limits, he constantly exercises reason to decide what he should do and how he should do it. This freedom and the ability to implement it need not be traced to any supernatural principle. For example, one must eat to nourish the body. This is a causal relationship, and every animal knows it. So does man. Yet, there are several occasions when man doesn't eat, despite being hungry. Maybe he's on a hunger strike fighting for a cause. Or he isn't willing to eat before his child does. He might even be waiting for some guests to come over. This rationality or ability to discern is enough for an individual to take a decision. No religious command is necessary for it. Religion rests on elements such as god, the other world, life after death, and the faith to accept all this. But morality can occur without faith; the moral urge develops and grows on its own.

All organised religions have originated from man's urge for a cooperative moral life. Wherever such a religion came into being, the place of its origin had been beset with atrocities, exploitation and immorality. In such a situation, man needed morality for his own sake as well as for sustaining a peaceful, orderly society. When organised religions were founded, they provided an alternative version of a moral society. At the time of their birth, the class structure of these societies was such that mere religious commands wouldn't have sufficed to inject morality into society. But people hadn't become aware of the reality of this structure back then. The populace, besieged by the problems of life and existence, found a reliable support in religion. Faith in the new religion, love for god and the desire for emancipation were expected to make people moral.

But the reality turned out to be the opposite. Religion was dominated by the vested interests of the priestly class. And

religious morality, which was supposed to emancipate human beings, began humiliating everyone. The priests' acts and religious commands, which were the cause of all this trouble, were considered as pious acts of morality. Christianity, to begin with, was evidently a religion of the poor and the downtrodden. Christ said, 'A camel can pass through the eye of a needle, but not a single rich man can go through the gate of heaven.' Yet, in the name of Christianity, passes to heaven were sold at high prices! In Hinduism, too, there is this contradiction between the walk and talk of religious morality. The Hindus believe that the soul exists in not only each human being but also every animal. Still, the so-called untouchables are treated as if they are soulless bodies.

The dynamism of social life, too, makes people overthrow traditional religious values. For instance, Hinduism expects a woman to swear total fidelity towards her spouse. This value, however, loses its meaning and propriety when the husband happens to be a debauched addict. It then becomes appropriate for the woman to start afresh, and make an independent life of her own. Thus, 'women's dignity' emerged as a new value, replacing the old religious requirement of 'women's fidelity'. Another traditional value was obeying your parents and doing what they tell you to do. But when parents harbour obsolete thoughts, believe in the hierarchy of castes and disapprove of inter-caste marriages, it becomes sensible and appropriate to ignore their views and practise the new value of equality. The secular philosophy of rationalism is not only markedly distinct from religion, but also works to make human behaviour independent of religion.

Naturally, religionists warn that 'society cannot be sustained without morality and morality isn't possible without religion'. They add that examining religion using rationalist criteria will shake the very foundation of morality and cause disorder in society. Of course, these fears have been proven to be baseless. Rationalism promotes secular morality, in which human good and dignity are at the centre, and personal freedom and the consequent individual responsibility are its basis. Despite being distinct from religion, rational morality doesn't oppose it. But rationalism does claim that the morality that keeps society healthy and ensures its citizens' freedom can be inculcated in

hundreds of better ways using the power of reason.

The core of morality is the maximum good of maximum people and a scope for the fulfilment of natural instincts. Once upon a time, it was immoral for a woman (in Maharashtra) to wear anything other than a nine-yard saree. However, the 'maximum good of maximum people' lies only in an adequate and convenient covering of the body; it is, therefore, moral. At the same time, one should watch against the 'fulfilment of natural instincts' making the fulfilment of other instincts impossible. In that case, it is certainly improper. (For example, intemperate drinking and getting addicted to it.)

Penance, fasts and emotional restrictions, such as prohibiting widow remarriage, may uphold religious but not secular morality. While the latter recognises an individual's freedom to decide what is good for them, it also expects them to be responsible for their decision. Accordingly, an individual decides whom to marry and carries out all the attached responsibilities. Secular morality also requires an individual to understand that the same freedom extends to all other human beings. Harming others for one's own benefit is unacceptable in secular morality. Therefore, rationalism uses secular morality to examine all thoughts and institutions that hamper society's secular zeal.

Social environment plays a huge role in the formation of moral values. In the early days of capitalism, industries needed a large workforce, but the available labour was engaged in agriculture. Several generations of a farming unit had been toiling for the same landlord family. They were not free to leave and join factories. Hence, a new value called 'individual freedom', which provided more scope and opportunity for one's abilities, was floated and eulogised. Per se, it is undoubtedly good and essential. Yet, the fact remains that it was born out of vested interests. Preaching to the underprivileged to be moral in poor social conditions is like crying in the wilderness. Similarly, 'love thy neighbour' is a good moral principle. But when it comes to the slums, where there are a hundred families and only one tap that runs for an hour a day, can one expect the residents to not quarrel for water? The solution isn't preaching morality but providing enough water to all of them. Secular morality is born out of man's discernment of values, but it is also aware that social conditions conducive to morality ought to be created first.

Every philosophy aims to bring about necessary change in the society. To achieve this, it is essential to enter politics. Today's politics, however, is dominated by four forces—power, money, caste and criminals—which can dishearten those who are struggling to transform things. Politics, therefore, isn't a suitable field for common people. More often than not, casteism (and even communal politics) is expressed in terms of pride for one's caste or religion and spreading prejudice and hatred for other castes or religions. These are regressive forces, incapable of producing anything desirable in society.

The economy is another means of effecting social change. But the present policy has rendered the common man helpless. The national economy is yoked to a global set-up, and no one can control the ups and downs of it.

Various types of superstition are proliferating in society, defying all of ANiS's efforts to spread modernity and science. Religious functions and congregations of various babas, buvas, bapus and sants continue to attract humongous crowds. The media daily supplies us all with audiovisual footage of these occasions. Political leaders prostrate themselves before these self-styled god-men. This exasperating situation frustrates an individual and leads them to believe that despite their strong will, they'd be unable to bring about any suitable change in the system. An organisation such as ANiS is sustained by the combined strength of its activists. But most other workers, especially in the unorganised sector, feel helpless. Quite a few of them go a step further and say, 'When no change seems possible, why shouldn't I profit from the situation instead of keeping aloof from it?'

ANiS's mission, if spelled out in one sentence, is a dialogue in action for bringing about a change in values. Philosophy is, of course, essential for any purposeful action. The Samiti involves various social groups in the process of change. Those who join us need to be acquainted with new thoughts and actions so that their perceptions and awareness are intensified and geared for transformation. An individual might not be able to directly intervene in the politics and economy of the country, but religion should never be used to enforce reforms, for the remedy of religion is more dangerous than the disease.

Only one alternative remains—the praxis of rationality.

Rationalism believes that when thoughts capture people's imagination, they become a material force. Let us understand this idea. Material force is similar to the water contained by a dam. When many people think as one mind, the force of the thought that captures their minds is infinitely increased. This force can be beneficent or malevolent. If the thought is positive and mutual, it can usher in an unimaginable change. Take, for example, the Nirmal Gram awards and the villages that have won them as part of the Gram Swachchata Abhiyan. A programme like this works on solutions for all health-related problems and matters, and drives away diseases and maladies. While villages in India are known as storehouses of filth, a few in Maharashtra have become models of cleanliness. Interestingly, there is no compulsion or remuneration for getting the job done. It is the visible, material effect of the villagers' shared thought.

On the other hand, when a thought that rules people's minds happens to be erroneous, it becomes a destructive force. A number of years ago, a few parties proposed demolishing a sacred place of one religion and building something else of another religion at that very spot. This self-destructive idea captured the imagination of the masses, pushing aside issues of development, social amity, etc. The effects of this irrational psyche included communal riots, a huge amount of bloodshed, loss of lives plus property worth crores of rupees, and of course, some political mileage to a party. This drives home the importance of building a rationalist psyche among people. You may not have any hold over the polity or economic policy of the nation, but you do have the instrument—the force of rationality—that can transform society.

The mission of rationalism begins by changing or improving the standard values of the society. Vivekikaran—praxis of rationalism—is how you do it. A standard value is a norm that helps you decide whether a social behaviour is right or wrong. The influence of traditions, an uncritical attitude, and social pressures create an illusion that the standard values or norms they result in are advantageous and, therefore, desirable. In reality, these norms cause difficulties. People are mentally enslaved to them. So, even if these norms endanger society, nobody has the courage to defy or change them.

Let us try to understand, with a couple of examples, what

these standard values are, how they exploit people, and why so many of us still insist on following them. Lakhs of rupees go into wedding ceremonies. Many a time, both parties simply cannot afford the expenses. So, they sell their land or incur debts and spend years after the event repaying them. Moreover, the entire outlay is unproductive and doesn't help the economy in any way. People understand this. Yet, they borrow money and splurge. Their excuse: 'What will everyone say if we don't spend?' A lavish wedding at any cost has, thus, become a social norm.

Another standard mandates that a couple must have a son as their heir. So, to ensure the birth of a boy, sex-determination tests are done. The foetus is aborted in case it's female. The norm that 'a son is a must' is created by a male-dominated society, and mental slavery pushed it deep into our social psyche. It has adversely affected the gender ratio in many parts of India, thus posing a grave danger to our society. Yet, people do not show the courage to change the idea that is the root of this trouble.

There are a number of such norms that exploit an individual economically, mislead them politically and enslave them mentally. The ruling class has vested interests in maintaining them. A couple of ministers, for instance, saw to it that no girl child was born in their families for more than a generation. So, righting the wrong norms is also a struggle against the power of the state and is beyond the abilities of most of us. It, therefore, has very little hope of success.

Rationalism is put to the test in these cases. A rationalist need not abide by wrong social norms. With their reasoning ability and sharpened ethics, they can fight the mental slavery caused by these norms. They can root out obsolete ideas from their own lives, family and community, and replace them with new and progressive values, and oppose exploitation.

New values are formed in the intellect. For this, a powerful class of intellectuals is necessary. This group may not wield power, but its members are capable of making society perceptive and humane, and working for its benefit. The task these people can undertake is also in consonance with the constitutional duties of every Indian citizen—adopting a scientific temper, humanism and spirit of reform. Fulfilling these duties honestly is what it means to try and change social norms.

The task is certainly demanding, but it is also essential for

the well-being of individuals and society, as well as for turning our democracy into a success. In the process, the change-makers too mature. They become alert and their conscience deepens. In fact, trying to replace harmful social norms is an aspect of personal freedom that is certainly beneficial to society.

Democracy means one individual, one value and one vote. At times, an individual realises the need for a certain value that may contradict social norms. They insist on exposing society to their point of view. Such confrontations are helpful in strengthening a democracy, for the power of a democracy lies in its citizens' insistence on those values that are right in their opinion.

In trying to change social norms, one shouldn't forget the fact that the powers that be have a hidden agenda in maintaining them. One should also remember that a change in these norms is unavoidably related to an all-round transformation of social structure. For example, to stop female foeticide, the value of gender equality has to be woven into one's own conduct first, and this isn't enough. The subordination of women in all aspects of life has to be consciously abolished. Efforts in that direction should include educating women and building hostels for them in all talukas. Every woman should have a share in the properties of her father and spouse. Women candidates should be given priority in legislative assemblies and the parliament, just like they are in local governments. Along with this, the regressive practice of kanyadaan should be vigorously opposed. In short, women should be empowered. Every individual should initiate the change beginning with themselves and their thoughts while inculcating gender equality in their family.

Talking about righting the wrong norms, holding discussions and discourses on the topic, and practising the corrected values in all walks of life are the need of the hour. Even it means defying the society or doing it all alone. These measures also have a tremendous scope. Take the case of Coca-Cola and Pepsi, which have no nutritional value and are, in fact, harmful to human health. Indigenous, homegrown beverages such as raw-mango panhe, buttermilk and sugarcane juice boast high nutritive value and are way cheaper. The money paid for these stay within the community and doesn't go to international aerated-drinks giants. All of us know these facts. Yet the norm

that has taken root, or is deliberately entrenched, in children's minds is 'Thanda matlab Coca-Cola'. Our question is why wait for any action to be initiated against the company? Why can't we inculcate the right norm right now that 'Coca-Cola isn't a healthy thanda'?

Another thought prevailing today is that the use of caste, money, power, crime, ruffians or any other means is acceptable, even wise, in contesting an election. Reforming the process of election is utterly necessary. But until a war against this bizarre logic is waged and won, we can and should refuse to succumb to this norm and vote conscientiously. It will change the trend in politicking.

This elucidation on changing social norms might sound convincing, but it is difficult to actually implement. That's because although man is a rational animal, he doesn't behave rationally unless he has to. Everyone knows that some amount of daily exercise is a must. But nobody works out until health issues make it unavoidable. Also, man is an emotional being. His feelings override his rationality. On top of that, physical and mental abilities vary among individuals. Accordingly, their potential to behave rationally also differs. A person's upbringing and the impressions made on their mind in childhood compel them to hold onto tradition and not reason. Vested interests also pressure one to stay away from rationality and behave irrationally to the benefit of such interests.

In addition, a large part of man's brain is mammalian even today. It is governed by the natural instincts of eating, sleeping, fear and sex. In the process of evolution, the neocortex—the new brain—grew only a few thousand years ago, whereas the animal brain has been developing for crores of years. However, the former process was a fast one, taking a fraction of the time consumed by the latter. Consequently, there wasn't enough room for any consonance to develop between these two parts. The rational brain's control over the animal brain is inadequate. That explains why people tend to act or make decisions impulsively.

Education has an important part to play here. It should aim at increasing the capabilities and effectiveness of the rational brain and enable it to control the animal brain in all situations. This is a time-consuming process, but efforts must be made to this end.

Intellect serves the man, while emotion possesses him. The former tells us to avoid sugary foods, exercise regularly, not to covet another's spouse, etc. But emotion compels one to behave contrarily to it. It's our intellect that shows us the right way. Whether to walk a certain path or not is also decided by emotion. An individual's intellect knows the road to the library and the need to study. But their emotion leads them to a cinema or pub.

A way to rectify the situation is to train the brain through education while also satisfying the emotions of love, friendship, charity, etc. But it's the intellect that should drive the need for fulfilment. The great rationalist Bertrand Russell once said, 'Our life should be inspired by love and guided by knowledge.'

Whenever a person talks of rationalism, someone invariably asks, 'What's the use of this empty chatter? Talk only when you have the courage to practise what you preach.' Certainly, those who walk their talk are indeed worthy of respect. But such beings are naturally very few, and to say that you shouldn't mention rationality if you are unable to follow it isn't wise. Take Agarkar's words: 'I will say what is desirable and do what is possible.' The pragmatism of this sentence revealing the limits of action is notable. Because of these limits, the praxis of rationalism develops through six stages—thought, reflection on a particular thought, articulation of thought, propaganda, building an organisation around the thought, practice and struggle for change in practices which are not coherent with the said thought.

To endeavour to understand the right thoughts is the first step. There is a labyrinth of thoughts in our society—at times, deliberately created to confuse everyone. It, thus, becomes difficult to choose the right thoughts. Articulating these thoughts is not mere boastful prattle; it is a fight that can cause friction. These include asking people to not consult horoscopes while fixing a date for a wedding, trying to convince them that there is no soul in the body, that hierarchy by birth is a wrong notion, and that inter-caste marriages aren't a bad thing, among others.

Propaganda is the next step. When numerous people convinced of the right thoughts keep uttering them time and again, wherever possible, their voices form the propaganda. If it is adequate and effective, the thought captures the imagination of the populace and helps transform the social or political

process. To spread the idea and make it hold, it is necessary to consolidate and systematise it through an organisation. These four steps should be followed at the least. If you act in accordance with the right thoughts and fight for them, rationalism can make rapid progress.

When one who propagates the trend of inter-caste marriages weds someone from another caste or promotes inter-caste alliances in their family, the effectiveness of their words multiplies. But the precondition of articulating a thought only if you put it into action is pointless; it should instead be considered as an individual's limitation. That's because society can easily sort out limitation from pretence. Someone who expresses the right thoughts shouldn't contradict them in their behaviour even if they are unable to practise them. A supporter of inter-caste marriages may not tie the knot with a person from another caste, but they should actively defend and encourage inter-caste alliances and never oppose them.

Rationalism leads to a superior human life. As per Russell, 'To abandon the struggle for private happiness, to expel all eagerness of temporary desire, to burn with passion for eternal things—this is emancipation, and this is the free man's worship.'

Appendix

A glance at the achievements of the Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti:

- Established in 1989.
- Works through 180 branches spread across all districts of Maharashtra. The movement is entirely people-supported and works without funding from the government or any Indian or international agency.
- Constant resource promoting rationalist action.
- A continuous struggle against misguiding, deceitful and exploitative superstitions.
- Tireless efforts to inculcate a scientific outlook among the masses.
- Critical examination of religion, rituals, customs and traditions pertinent to the present times.
- Ongoing attempts to engender a moral society based on rationalism.
- Wholehearted cooperation with all progressive movements for a comprehensive social reform.
- Profound conviction in the principles of democracy, socialism, secularism, social justice and gender equality, which are all enshrined in the Constitution of India.

How we are spreading a scientific outlook among the people:

- Two thousand lectures (on an average) every year all over Maharashtra on the various aspects of the scientific outlook and the eradication of superstition.
- Demonstrations for replicating the so-called miracles of self-styled god-men.
- The Vijnyan Bodha Vahini programme, which aims to

inculcate a scientific outlook among the rural populace.

- Regular publication of the illustrious magazine *Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Vartapatra* , since the inception of ANiS.
- Publication of nearly fifty books on the movement.
- The Vaijnyanik Janiva Prakalpa project, which enlightens teachers on the eradication of superstition and the inculcation of a scientific outlook. Thousands of teachers have been trained and two lakh students have appeared for the examination testing the knowledge and skills they have acquired through the project.
- A novel self-learning project conducted by students, which includes answering a questionnaire based on the self-study material. Nearly two lakh students have availed of this.
- Planetarium on wheels, which projects a simulated space on a semicircular dome. It has enjoyed tremendous response across Maharashtra.
- The statewide Khagol Yatra, an expedition acquainting students with the celestial zone to celebrate the International Year of Astronomy in 2009.
- Seminars on inter-caste and interfaith marriages.
- Hundreds of lectures for educating people on snakes, snakebites and the required first-aid, along with the superstitions associated with them all. Plus, an expedition exhibiting poisonous and non-poisonous snakes. All these have helped ANiS obtain recognition as Friends of Snakes.
- Bhanamati is a culture-bound mental disease in Maharashtra's Marathwada region. A woman, or even a group of women at times, seem to become possessed and start huffing, puffing, screaming, and barking. A movement was organised to enlighten the people, especially those in the district of Latur, on this problem and treat the women suffering from this infliction.
- Movements against the cruel custom of dakin.
- Opposing the inclusion of astrology in the curricula of UGC institutions through many seminars and conferences.
- Statewide campaign challenging participants to prove the truth behind various 'miracles' with a prize money of Rs 21 lakh.
- A total of 170 programmes as part of 'Spotting ghosts and

enlightening minds', a campaign against the prevailing belief in supernatural elements, mainly in the Konkan region.
- A scientific explanation of Bhramak Vastushastra (illusory ancient Indian architecture) propagated throughout Maharashtra via innumerable lectures.
- Bilingual website (www.antisuperstition.org in English and Marathi) and a quarterly online magazine in English.

Conferences

During the last two decades, ANiS has arranged these state-level conferences in Maharashtra to encourage public discourse on important issues.

- Breaking the chains of superstitious customs
- Women's declaration on the eradication of superstition
- Agitation against god-men
- Action for scientific perceptivity
- Awakening of rationality
- Charter of education for secularism and social justice
- Declaration of a scientific outlook and the eradication of superstition in education
- Resolve for rational discourse by the youth

Programmes

ANiS's strength lies in the novelty of the programmes it offers.

- **A celebration of commitment to the Constitution:** ANiS's philosophy matches the intention and purpose of India's Constitution. Through this programme, our commitment to the Constitution manifests in various forms. One of them is the hoisting of the tricolour by a Dalit woman.
- **Demonstration against addiction:** Both substance abuse and superstition destroy an individual's ability to discern. ANiS observes 31 December every year as the day of our resolve against addiction, which we express through various activities.

- **Inter-caste marriages:** These have the power to dislodge the caste system, which ANiS believes is essentially a superstition, as it is discriminatory on the basis of one's birth in a particular caste. To eradicate it, ANiS felicitates inter-caste couples every January. The awardees relate their experiences to the public for their edification.
- **Day of exposing the truth behind miracles:** On 21 September 1995, rumours spread that Ganesha idols all over India (and even abroad) had begun sipping milk. ANiS has earmarked this day to demonstrate 'miracles' and explain how they can be wrought scientifically.

The struggle

- ANiS activists have been opposing the highly exploitative buvabaji for the past twenty years. They have exposed many a buva and revealed their true character. A few of them have even been booked and convicted. A separate volume is required to throw light on the vast canvas of our fight against this practice.
- A house is pelted all of a sudden, clothes catch fire, and things start to disappear. These strange incidents are then traced to a bhanamati. In the last twenty years, ANiS has been confronted with about two hundred such episodes and has been successful in solving the mystery behind them and arresting them. The number of such instances has considerably reduced due to the uninterrupted efforts of ANiS activists to bring out the logical explanation behind them.
- There is no scientific basis for astrology; it only encourages a fatalistic mindset. ANiS has burned hundreds of horoscopes to impress their futility on people's minds. The Samiti also conducted a test to ascertain whether astrology is a science. It enlisted the department of statistics, along with Dr Jayant Narlikar, head of the Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics (IUCAA), Pune, for the purpose. Astrology failed to pass this test. ANiS also declared a prize of Rs 21 lakh to the person who could correctly predict the results of the 2009 Maharashtra legislative assembly elections. No astrologer could bag it.

- ANiS also attacks the custom of Dakin and Bhagats. The latter are humiliated and made to apologise and discontinue their practice. The affected women are rescued and given all the necessary help.

Law

- Since its establishment, ANiS has been actively fighting for a legal ban on black-magic practices. The government gave a written assurance in 1999 to pass such a regulation but has failed to do so. Since then, the Samiti has been confronting the government using constitutional methods. A separate book needs to be written to narrate ANiS's struggles in getting the law enacted.

Criticism of religion

- Nearly 3,000–4,000 pilgrimages and religious fairs take place in Maharashtra every year. A large number of animals are sacrificed at many of these events. ANiS members explain the futility of such killings and the cruelty involved in them. They have amicably opposed the custom on about 150 such occasions. The activists have been successful to a certain extent.
- ANiS staged a peaceful protest against the ban on women climbing to the top of the Shani Shingnapur shrine. It became a common topic of discourse all over Maharashtra. The verdict on this dispute is expected to be soon delivered by the Bombay High Court. *
- Mahatma Phule believed in marriages without any dowry, priests, rituals, or obsession with finding out the right mahurat. ANiS has followed this simple, inexpensive method for nearly two hundred weddings.
- ANiS encourages inter-caste and interfaith marriages and offers guidance and assistance to those wanting such alliances. The Samiti has established a centre each—in Latur and Kolhapur—to help couples overcome all kinds of resistance and antagonism, including threats.
- ANiS provides stiff resistance to the revival of the outdated yajnya (sacrificial fire) ritual.

- The immersion of Ganesha idols, along with flowers, garlands and other offerings made to the deity, causes severe water pollution. ANiS initiated a campaign called 'Donate Your Idols' and has received a good response for it. Many self-styled custodians of Hinduism opposed this campaign with all their might. But the Supreme Court's directive to the government to curb water pollution has strengthened our cause. The government is yet to act on this, and that's why ANiS keeps compelling it to take appropriate action.
- Holi is a festival marked by excessive wood burning and foul abuses. Dried chunks of cow dung are used as fuel and puran polis are thrown into the bonfire as offerings. ANiS has suggested an alternative way to celebrate the occasion. It involves cleaning our surroundings, tossing the litter thus collected into the fire and distributing the puran polis to the poor. The cow-dung cakes are given to farmers for manure. When these measures yielded great results, ANiS next proposed to 'burn' social evils, including corruption, addiction, and individual shortcomings such as laziness, shirking responsibilities and avoidance of work.
- The bursting of crackers and other fireworks during occasions such as Diwali causes noise and air pollution and even lead to accidents at times. The production of these explosive devices also encourages child labour. ANiS once asked a bunch of students to save and invest the money they spend on crackers in books and toys. The programme eventually grew into a movement, and in 2001, the amount of savings totalled Rs 1.7 crore.
- When a girl develops a lock of matted hair on her head, she's pushed into becoming a devadasi, while a boy is made a Potraj. ANiS initiated the Jata Nirmoolan campaign to stop this tradition and saved many a youngster from these despicable traditions by removing their matted locks. The rescued were then reinstated into society as normal living beings.

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* This ban was lifted two years after the brutal assassination of Dr Dabholkar. After his death, ANiS continued the litigation that

he had initiated.